

ORNAMENTAL SWEET POTATO VINES

Question: I have a flower bed planted with an ornamental sweet potato vine and have noticed large tubers as I started preparing the bed to plant pansies. I assume the tubers are from the sweet potato vines and I want to know if they are edible.

Answer: Ornamental sweet potato vine, *Ipomoea batatas*, is a true sweet potato complete with tubers, but has bolder, more colorful foliage than its vegetable sibling. It is grown for its decorative foliage, vigorous growth habit and an added benefit this year is its drought tolerance. They work nicely in mixed containers and as a ground cover and have become very popular in the last few years.

The large tuberous roots are edible but most have a poor flavor or even a bitter taste. Another consideration is the pesticides that may have been used on them by you or the greenhouse grower. One option you have is to save the tubers to grow new plants for next year. They are also very easy to root and can be grown indoors as a houseplant and used as propagation stock plants for next spring. One consideration when growing them in containers is that there have been some reports of the large roots protruding out of the top of the pots and in some cases actually bursting pots apart toward the end of the growing season. New varieties such as the 'Sweet Carolina' series are available that have smaller root systems and are less vigorous making them more suitable for smaller containers.

The sweet potato vine is a tropical plant grown as an annual in Alabama. Though full sun is preferred, it will grow in partial shade. Keep the soil moderately moist or the vines will clearly let you know they are thirsty by quickly wilting, with limp flagged leaves. Fortunately as I mentioned they are very drought tolerant and will quickly perk up once thoroughly watered.

Unlike its cousin, the morning glory which is easily grown from seed, sweet potato vines are propagated by stem cuttings that develop roots in just four or five weeks. The unique foliage and forms make ornamental sweet potato vines popular as "spillers" in containers and "spawlers" in border flower gardens. One sweet potato vine in a container will quickly fill in around the rim of the pot and spill over the edges. In the garden, sweet potato vine is an impressive, fast-growing annual ground cover that should be planted no closer than two feet apart. This vine also thrives in summer heat, and can easily be trimmed when it outgrows its boundary or strays too far from its container. If you need to fill other areas you can take these cuttings and root them directly in the bed where you want them by keeping the area moist until roots develop.

The three most commonly grown varieties of ornamental sweet potato vines are 'Blackie', 'Marguerite,' and 'Tricolor' ('Pink Frost'.) 'Blackie' has deep purple to nearly black foliage with large, deep cut leaves. Bold, chartreuse green, heart-shaped leaves characterize 'Marguerite' and 'Tricolor' is a less-vigorous variety with multi-colored variegated leaves in shades of green, white, and pink. The "Tri-color' leaves are small with pointy lobes. A new variety, 'Carolina Purple', has dark purple foliage and a more restrained growth habit and as mentioned earlier it does not make large tubers.

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