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CLIPPINGS

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For Immediate Release

One Hot Potato

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It seems to me that nearly every recent nutrition article promotes eating sweet potatoes for better health. Since I am currently preparing my 2017 home vegetable garden, I decided to check it out. I read that if one is looking to grow a vegetable with the most nutrient dense bang for the buck, the sweet potato fits that bill perfectly. So my garden experiment this season is growing sweet potatoes. I'm hopeful of sweet rewards on this year's Thanksgiving dinner table.

The success of any experiment, to a large extent, depends upon research. My research turned up a 2013 "Clippings" article on growing sweet potatoes written by ISU Extension Horticulturalist Margaret Murphy. She wrote, "...besides being delicious and easy to cook, sweet potatoes are fat free, high in vitamins A & C plus a good source of calcium, potassium and fiber." In fact, the nutritional value of sweet potatoes is ranked highest among similar vegetables by the Center for Science in the Public Interest. No wonder nutritionists promote sweet potatoes as the new super food. This is one hot potato.

To my surprise, research also suggests that sweet potatoes are relatively undemanding to grow and are being grown successfully in some Iowa locations. Whew! While they will tolerate heavy clay soil, they prefer mounded light sandy soil for better drainage. They can grow in infertile soil, but respond much better in rich composted soil. They grow best in sunny locations with regular rain or irrigation without water-logging. However, they do not tolerate frost, and managing soil temperature is a critical factor in growing great sweet potatoes.

The most important finding in my research is that sweet potatoes simply will not grow when soil temperature is below 50 degrees. Because of the short growing season in northern climates, to grow sweet potatoes, it might be wise to raise the soil temperature to 70 degrees or higher before planting. Temperatures above 70 degrees allow growth, 80 degrees is better and near 90 degrees or above is excellent. It is highly recommended to use plastic to cover raised beds to promote these optimal soil temperatures.

My plan then is to choose a sunny location, add compost and perhaps some sand to lighten my dense black soil, prepare for regular watering and cover raised planting rows with plastic. One more point: sweet potatoes are not grown from tubers like the standard potato but started from sprouts or "slips". So I've ordered slips of a leading sweet potato variety, developed specifically for growing in northern climates, to be sent from Georgia in time for June planting.

Now that I've explored the nutritional advantages and planned for the best possible production in my experimental sweet potato season, it's now time to implement the plan. Watch for a post-season article on harvesting and storing sweet potatoes. I'm counting on this great experiment being a sweet success!