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Sweet Potato or Yam?

Yams and sweet potatoes are well loved around the world but many people do not know the difference between the two. What many call a yam is actually a sweet potato. Although they may look and taste very similar, the true yam and sweet potato are not botanically related. To avoid confusion, the USDA has made it a requirement that the label “yam” also say “sweet potato” but this has not cleared the confusion and has possibly made it even more confusing. Although sweet potatoes originate from Tropical America (Peru, Equator) importation into the U.S. is prohibited due to the concern over exotic diseases and insects, therefore, the sweet potatoes we grow here in the United States mainly come from southern Florida while yams are mainly grown in West Africa and Asia. So, unless you buy your “yams” from an ethnic store, they are sweet potatoes.

What is the difference, you may wonder? Many people don't know that there is actually a big difference between sweet potatoes and yams. Sweet potatoes are roots found mainly in tropical America and are part of the Morning Glory family. Yams are tubers (or bulbs) of a tropical vine found in Central and South America, the West Indies, Africa and Asia.

There are two varieties of sweet potato: the pale version has a very thin, yellow skin with a bright yellow flesh. The darker skinned sweet potato has a thicker, orange skin with a sweet, moist flesh. Sweet potatoes come from the plant group Dicotyledon, are short and blocky with tapered ends, have smooth skin and are more moist and sweeter than yams.

Yams come from the Monocotyledon plant family, are long and cylindrical, have rough, scaly skin and are more dry and starchy than sweet potatoes. The true yam can be small or can grow to be very large. The flesh has a range of colors from off-white to yellow, pink or purple. The skin color may range from off-white to dark brown.

Both yams and sweet potatoes grow from October through March. California now ranks third in sweet potato production behind North Carolina and Louisiana. Close to 80 percent of California's production takes place in the San Joaquin Valley, in Merced County, Fresno and Stanislaus counties.

Finally, a fact that not many realize is that sweet potatoes are full of vitamin A (they contain even more than carrots) while yams contain very little. Vitamin A is very important to aid in vision, a healthy immune system, healthy skin and a healthy heart.

So, next time you go to the grocery store, do something healthy for yourself. Buy a sweet potato and while you are there you can impress the produce person with a little trivia.