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December 10, 2009
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Digging for Goodness

Hopefully everyone got their fill of sweet potato casseroles and sweet potato pies over Thanksgiving. Maybe they weren't completely drowned in sugar and butter, just lightly flavored with the extras. And you went for a nice long walk afterward to keep those calories on the move and off the hips. In any case, you can rest easier knowing that besides being delicious, sweet potatoes, along with many other root vegetables, are also very nutritious.

Sweet potatoes, white potatoes, turnips and rutabagas are surprisingly good sources of potassium. That mineral is one of the three that counteract the effects of sodium on our blood pressure. So adding more of them to our diet can help relax the arteries and reduce our internal pressure.

The dark yellow roots sweet potatoes and carrots are excellent sources of vitamin A, good for our eyes and as a good antioxidant probably very helpful in reducing our risks of other a multitude of other illnesses as well. Wasn't it great of Mother Nature to make use useful stuff so good tasting too? Don't feel bad if carrot sticks are not high on your list of favorite snacks. We actually get more vitamin A from cooked carrots, sweet potatoes, even tomatoes, than we do from the raw ones. Sweet potatoes and carrots are also good sources of fiber, to keep things moving smoothly inside. Most of us don't get nearly enough fiber in our diets, so adding some extra veggies will help keep the intestines happier.

Although they all go by the name 'sweet potato' there are many varieties, in a

surprising range of colors. Some are almost white (with very little vitamin A), to deep golden beauties (lots of vitamin A), to some that are almost purple. A few varieties are grown just to make starch, or for animal feed, so we never see them on the produce counters.

While they are all fairly sweet, some become even sweeter when they're cooked, others stay starchy and mealy. Most of those sold in the South are usually the sweeter varieties, while Northern cooks generally prefer the less-sweet varieties. If you've moved here from New York you might find that your traditional recipe just doesn't taste quite the same. It's not your fault, blame the sweet potatoes. They're just not the same.

One trick that many people are not aware of when it comes to cooking sweet potatoes is that they should not be peeled or chopped very far in advance of cooking. You might see little white drops or beads when they're cut. This is a latex that the potato vine produces. If this latex is allowed to sit exposed to air for any extended time it will start to oxidize and turn color. If they must be peeled or chopped early be sure to keep them in water. If you have a recipe that calls for grated fresh sweet potato, grate them directly into the batter. As soon as it's cooked the latex is denatured and won't cause any problems.

If you managed to grow enough to store for future use, you'll need to cure them. They're delicate and can bruise or get sunburn very easily. While it's not complicated, curing does involve some careful attention to details. To allow the skin to toughen, fresh sweet potatoes need to be stored for a week or more at about 80° F in a very humid but not wet environment. Then they can be stored in a cool location for several more months.

If you find sweet potatoes on sale, go ahead and buy some extras. They've all ready been cured, and will keep in a cool place for a month or more as long as they're kept dry. If the only cool place you have is the refrigerator, that's too cold. Sweet potatoes in the 'fridge are likely to get hard cores and soft outer spots from the chill. Don't let any drops of water get onto them or they'll mold quickly. Once they've been cooked they will keep in the refrigerator for a week. Mashed sweet potatoes can be kept frozen for many months and keep their good quality.

If you happen to have an extra baked sweet potato or two, turn them into a breakfast treat with this recipe. It can be used to make pancakes or waffles. The pancakes will be thick and fluffy, waffles will be thin and crisper, so take your choice. And since they'll be sweeter either way, skip the syrup.

Sweet Potato Pancakes

3 Tbsp melted butter, cooled	1 ½ C flour
1Tbsp baking powder	1 tsp salt
¼ tsp nutmeg	3 eggs, separated
1 C low fat milk	1 C mashed sweet potatoes

Sift dry ingredients together in medium bowl. Beat egg yolks, then beat in milk, sweet potatoes and butter. Stir in dry ingredients. Beat egg whites until they form soft peaks. Fold into batter. Cook on preheated waffle iron according to manufacturer's instructions, or on skillet with small amount of oil. Makes 4 waffles or 4-6 pancakes, depending on size.