

Sweet potato vines sought for ornamental beauty



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Midwest Gardening

Once relegated to the vegetable garden, sweet potato vines have earned their keep in ornamental gardens, too.

When a purple-leaf sweet potato named Blackie first came on the scene several decades ago, gardeners took notice. Next was the chartreuse-colored variety called Margarita, which quickly became ubiquitous in gardens throughout the country and can be seen tumbling over the sides of large ornamental containers and window boxes or sometimes even used as a ground cover.

Nowadays there are ornamental sweet potato plants not only with traditional heart-shaped leaves but also some with foliage that looks more like oak leaves. Still others have finely-cut, almost thread-like leaves. Additional colors such as bronze, copper and a mix of green and yellow offer many possibilities for creating colorful container combos.

Gardeners love ornamental sweet potatoes because they're showy and easy to grow. These tropical plants thrive in full sun or partial shade, and they love hot weather, the hotter the better. They need a fair amount of water and quickly wilt when dry, but just as quickly recover as soon as they get a drink.

But ornamental sweet potatoes haven't been completely free of problems. If not trimmed back, the vigor-

ous vines can overwhelm the other plants in a container. So breeders got to work and have now introduced a new generation of compact ornamental sweet potato varieties with stems that grow only 3 or 4 feet long.

The Illusion series from **Proven Winners** (provenwinners.com), for example, offers dense, compact plants that have lacy, dissected foliage. So far this series includes purple-green Midnight Lace, copper-colored Garnet Lace and chartreuse Emerald Lace.

Several small beetles, weevils and caterpillars sometimes chew holes in sweet potato leaves. They can be controlled with insecticides but, in a home garden, I think it's easier to just pick off any damaged leaves. New foliage quickly grows to take their place.

Another problem: Deer and rabbits love to munch on the leaves of sweet potato vines and are capable of eating them down to mere stubs. It makes good sense to grow ornamental sweet

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 potatoes in containers on the deck or other spot where these four-legged pests are less likely to find the plants.

You can eat the tuberous root of an ornamental sweet potato, but you probably wouldn't want to.

These varieties have been selected for their colorful foliage, not the flavor of the roots. My pick for eating is a variety named Jewel.

Surrounding my vegetable garden with a deer fence plus rabbit guard saved my edible sweet potatoes from extinction.

• Write to Jan Riggenschach in care of the Daily Herald, P.O. Box 280, Arlington Heights, IL 60006. Please enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

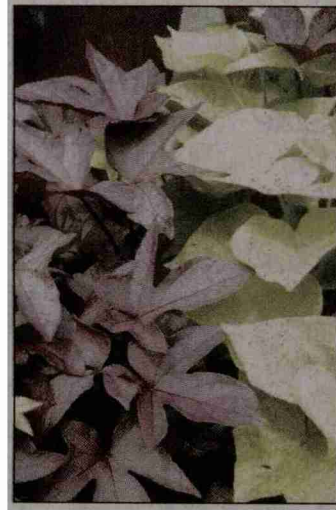


PHOTO BY JAN RIGGENBACH
Easy-to-grow ornamental sweet potato vines spill over the sides of a container.

