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**“Yams” or “Sweet Potatoes”?
Both Terms Correct**

The correct answer to the question “Is it a yam or a sweet potato?” is “yes.”

Dr. Mike Cannon, extension specialist and director of the LSU Agricultural Center’s Sweet Potato Research Station in Chase, says he can settle arguments that sometimes occur over family dinner tables by saying both sides are right.

He says Louisiana sweet potato growers started using the term “yam” several decades ago as a marketing tool to help distinguish their variety from varieties grown on the East Coast.

“The Louisiana sweet potato was softer, sweeter and more moist when baked,” Cannon said. “It was different from the dry, mealy variety grown in the East.”

To complicate matters, there also is a tuber grown in tropical countries referred to as a yam. Cannon said that product is different from a Louisiana yam, but doesn’t cause much controversy since it is not sold in the United States.

To add further confusion, however, there also is a practice of referring to freshly harvested sweet potatoes as “sweet potatoes” and sweet potatoes that have been cured for six to eight weeks as “yams.”

“When first harvested, sweet potatoes are not as sweet, soft and moist as they will become with time,” Cannon said. “It usually takes six to eight weeks after harvest for sweet potatoes to reach their peak in sweetness when baked.

“Freshly harvested sweet potatoes are shipped to market beginning with the new crop in July and August until about the first part of November,” he says, adding, “Those that are shipped for the Thanksgiving market and thereafter generally are cured – meaning they have been harvested and stored long enough for them to develop the desired flavor and texture when baked.”

Cannon said it is difficult for the average consumer to tell by looking at a raw sweet potato whether it has been cured or not. But he said Louisiana growers are pretty strict about shipping only cured potatoes for the holidays.

He said there has been an effort by competing states to drop the term “yams” when referring to sweet potatoes, but this meets with resistance from Louisiana growers.

“The term ‘Louisiana Yams’ has served the industry as an unofficial trademark and is likely here to stay,” he said.

There also is some confusion about whether sweet potato is one word or two, since it is used both ways.

But, meanwhile, please pass the yams.

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