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**Demand for sweet potatoes on the rise**

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By

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Few foods say autumn the way sweet potatoes do. Their taste and coloring are perfect complements to the season. While last year was a rollercoaster for the produce industry, sweet potatoes were a popular item with consumers due to their increased shelf life over other produce items. North Carolina is known for growing exceptional sweet potatoes, both by the volumes grown and the quality of the product.

According to Rebecca Scott, grower accounting and marketing director for the Nashville, NC-based Nash Produce, the growing conditions and soil types are optimal for successful sweet potato growth, allowing growers to produce a wide size variety of the root vegetable to fulfill any customer preference.

“Many families have spent a lot more time cooking than in years past and having a product that can be cooked in so many different ways with a vast array of flavors was a much-appreciated change of pace for many,” Scott said. “We are hopeful for a successful, and healthy rest of 2021. As the holidays are quickly approaching, we hope to see families gathering together to enjoy those sweet potato staple meals they may not have gotten a chance to cook in 2020.”

Michelle Grainger, executive director of the North Carolina SweetPotato Commission, noted the harvest began in early September and should now be in full swing.

“Right now, it’s a bit of a crystal ball ‘call’ at the moment to speak to the year and what our final numbers may be,” she noted. “That said, we anticipate acreage to be somewhat similar to last year’s numbers and are hearing early reports that the sweetpotatoes that have been dug thus far are looking great and proudly holding North Carolina’s standard for premium sweetpotatoes, nicely.”

From August 2020 to August 2021, NCDA reported a total of 11,971,868 40-pound cartons of fresh-market sweet potatoes.

“We always want our retailers to know that North Carolina Sweetpotatoes are available 12 months of the year. Given their tremendous nutritious value and versatility, not to mention shelf-life stability, they should be prominently displayed for consumers to easily select,” Grainger said. “Additionally, we have entered into a partnership with Shopping for Health where we are providing retail dietitians several resources that they may draw upon to help further feature our favorite tater including our newly released Retail Dietitian’s Toolkit.”

While many grocers offer convenience and deli counters, the organization would love to see them utilize some of its recommendations on how to incorporate sweet potatoes into a more regular diet. This could be through its numerous recipe options or drawing upon the specific resources created for

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nutritionists and dietitians alike.

It's not just North Carolina that is famous for sweet potatoes. Louisiana is expecting a strong crop in 2021 as well — after growers were spared from Hurricane Ida.

Things also look to be getting back to normal for Louisiana growers, after they needed to pivot last year since a majority of what they sold in the past went to foodservice operators, and most were closed down for a great part of 2020.

“Most of the consumption went to retail markets and most of the farmers were able to make that change and did a good job selling to those retail customers,” said Rene Simon, director of the Louisiana Sweet Potato Commission.

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