



The Fentress Giving Garden

A collaborative, interdenominational food ministry
Issue 2026-3, October 2026

Around the Garden

Warm weather crops are almost done; cool weather crops are in the ground and growing nicely. On October 1, a dedicated crew harvested our sweet potatoes and placed them in the curing site. In a couple of weeks, we'll box and weigh them. It looks like an abundant harvest, but we'll soon know for sure. See below to see more about the harvest and to learn some really interesting things about this versatile vegetable. The article includes a recipe. We'd love to share your favorite recipe that uses sweet potatoes. If you're so inclined, send your recipe to Bill Gregory (whgregory@cox.net). We'll collate and print them in a future newsletter.

Summer cleanup was greatly aided by a local group of young athletes. Look at page 3 to see them at work clearing spent tomato vines.

It takes a lot of labor to make this garden succeed. Planning, preparing, planting, nurturing, weeding, harvesting, delivering, cleaning up, maintaining equipment and infrastructure. Some people give many hours of their time each week, some a few hours each week, and some only on special occasions. We appreciate each and every one of them.



Photos by Robin Comfort

It's Sweet Potato Time in Chesapeake

by Robin Comfort

Early October is sweet potato time at the Fentress Giving Garden in Chesapeake.

By the time you read this article, volunteers will have pulled them out of the ground, and readied

them to be boxed and distributed across Chesapeake.

It is not as easy as one might think to harvest sweet potatoes. 90-110 days after planting but before the first frost, they are pulled out of the ground, after which they have to set a spell to dry and cure. Curing them involves keeping them in a warm, humid, and dark space (80-85°F) for 2-4 weeks to harden their skins and turn starches into sugar. Who knew?

Did you know:

- Sweet potatoes pre-date the Irish white potato? Earliest cultivation records date back to 750 BCE in Peru, though archeological evidence indicates they were growing much earlier than that, between 2500 - 1850 BCE.
- Way back in the 1700s George Washington planted sweet potatoes?
- Sweet potatoes are related not to the potato family but to the morning glory? Nor is it a yam. They are entirely different species. Sweet potatoes are high in beta carotene content, with which your body makes Vitamin A. One sweet potato has enough beta carotene to produce more than 400% of your daily Vitamin A requirement, while yams have about 3%.
- Sweet potatoes are adaptable to a wide range of growing conditions, cultivated as a perennial vegetable in tropical conditions and as an annual in cooler climates? It is one of the most widely cultivated crops. Globally, we consume more than 131 million tons of sweet potatoes each year. They are widely acknowledged as being jam-packed with nutrients, very healthy (well minus the



Morning Glory

marshmallow topping), easy to store, and relatively inexpensive. A WIN on all sides.

- Sweet potatoes are seen as a key crop for food security, especially in an era of climate change? They grow quickly and can tolerate less-than-ideal soil conditions, and, relative to many other crops, they use water very efficiently. (Thanks to Michelle Johnson, a seed historian at Baker Creek and RareSeeds)
- George Washington Carver, a former slave and a scientist, helped the southern farmers grow reliable, high-yield sweet potato crops to improve their daily diets and avoid financial ruin? He also taught crop rotation using peanuts and sweet potatoes to restore depleted nitrogen and other nutrients from the soil damage caused by the continuous planting of cotton. He developed approximately 118 products from sweet potatoes. Some of those food products were flour, vinegar, molasses, and starch. Non-food products were stains, dyes, paints, writing ink, rubber, and glue.

The Fentress Giving Garden volunteers harvested, dried, are curing and soon will share about two tons of sweet potatoes this year! Such a blessing to all who receive these amazing vegetables. God is certainly good.

The next time you visit your favorite farmer's market or grocery store, grab some local sweet potatoes. Mash them, bake them, scallop them, roast them, put them in a pie, baked goods, or soup. No matter how you prepare them, they are delicious and healthy (except for the marshmallow topping). Enjoy!

Sweet Potato Pumpkin Spice Muffins **Ingredients**

1 box of pumpkin muffin mix
2 eggs
1 large sweet potato
Optional for topping: toasted pumpkin seeds (pepitas)

Instructions

1. Preheat the oven to **400F**.
2. Pierce the sweet potato skin 5-6 times. Place on a microwaveable plate and microwave for 5-8 minutes, rotating halfway through.
3. Let the sweet potato cool and scoop out the flesh. Add to a bowl with the pumpkin muffin mix, eggs and 1 cup of water and combine until a smooth batter forms.
4. Divide the batter into **12 muffin cups** and bake for **18-20 minutes**.

Scenes from around the garden

We appreciate help at the garden, and it comes in many forms and different packages.

Sometimes it's individuals we may not yet know, sometimes it's a group from the Navy doing community service work. This time it was a youth soccer team from Chesapeake United that arrived full of energy, ready and willing to assist with cleaning out the area of the garden holding expended tomato plants. Sowing, growing, and harvesting are the most picturesque, and among the most satisfying of our tasks, but cleaning up to make way for the next crop is among the most important. Thank you to this team of able bodied, and now more experienced, gardeners!



Who We Support

We currently support these local faith-based food pantries:

- À Agape Food Pantry ĩ Great Bridge United Methodist Church
- À Impact Community Food Pantry ĩ True Way Church
- À Father Romeo D. Jazmin Food Pantry ĩ Prince of Peace Catholic Church
- À House of Blessing ĩ Harvest VA, Assembly of God, via Plant a Row for the Hungry, a Chesapeake Master Gardeners activity.

How You Can be Part of This Ministry

You can help:

- Assist with projects to enhance the infrastructure of the garden
- Maintain the garden by planting, harvesting, weeding, and mulching
- Produce mulch from dried leaves
- Spray organic/organic-like pesticides on crops when needed
- Maintain and operate the irrigation system
- Maintain the electric fence
- Keep garden tools sharp and ready to use
- Deliver produce by driving to various food banks we serve
- Look for and write grant requests to help fund this ministry

We would love to have your participation.

To get involved, contact Judy Speas (judithspeas@gmail.com) at Centerville Baptist Church, or Janet Grubbs (jdgrubbs72@gmail.com) at Great Bridge United Methodist Church.

We Have Harvested this Year

We've enjoyed an abundant growing season and harvest. Look at the table below to see what we harvested and donated so far. All numbers are harvested weight in pounds:

Vegetable	2026 Total
Banana Peppers	241
Jalapeno Peppers	319
Beets	3
Green Bell Peppers	1865
Butternut Squash	624
Cabbage	361
Carrots	227
Kale	174
Collards	893
Cucumbers	2257
Cantaloupe	3787
Eggplant	419
Garlic	34
Green Beans	199
Lettuce	487
Onions	1600
Sugar Snap Peas	172
Summer Yellow Squash	1059
Sweet Potatoes	TBD
Tomatoes	3951
Turnips	168
Turnip Greens	19
White Potatoes	2312
Zucchini	462
Total	21633

The Fentress Giving Garden

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