

The Weekly

Information Resource Bulletin

Focus: Sweet Potatoes

To achieve food security and agricultural development goals, adaptation to climate change is necessary. To be successful, this transformation must take place without depleting natural resources.

Climate change is already having an impact on agriculture and food security – mainly because of unpredictable weather and extreme events – such as droughts and flooding.

As it was discussed in the previous bulletin, sustainable agriculture under a warmer and drier climate requires choosing to raise crops that tolerate extreme weather.

In this bulletin we turn our focus to the sweet potato. In addition to being a healthy food, the sweet potato is valuable as a food security crop. It grows in marginal conditions, requiring little labor and few chemical fertilizers.

The goals of the Weekly Bulletin are:

- To learn from other farmers about the advantages of growing sweet potato
- To promote discussion and dialogue between listeners and other community members about the adaptive strategies that farmers can use in response to climate change effects (growing sweet potato)
- To emphasize the health benefits of eating sweet potato

The Problem: Not Enough Knowledge about Sweet Potato being a Drought-tolerant Crop

Hunger and malnutrition are common in Malawi, and the challenges are worsened by climate change that hampers agricultural production – which, in turn, creates health and socioeconomic problems.

Sweet potato which is already widely grown in the country is a crop, but most farmer don't realize that it is highly drought-tolerant.

Apart from being a food security crop, sweet potato is a cheap, nutritious solution for farmers that need to grow more food on less area for rapidly multiplying populations.

Its ability to produce better yields in poor conditions with less labor makes sweet potato particularly suitable as

a crop for households in a country like Malawi, which is threatened by climate change effects.

According to Global Crop Diversity Trust, the sweet potato is able to grow in dry conditions and with little demand for either water or fertilizer. Sweet potato ranks as the world's seventh most important food crop, principally because of its versatility and adaptability.

Most of the sweet potatoes grown in Malawi are used for home consumption, which further emphasizes the importance of sweet potato as a food security crop.

In fact, in Malawi, sweet potato is the third-most common food crop after maize and cassava.

Activities for Journalists

Use your radio station to help your community understand that sweet potato is one of the crops that could help the country in its drive to food security, regardless of changes in the climate. That is, sweet potato is grown for food and cash.

Help your listeners understand the following points about the sweet potato:

Most farmers store sweet potatoes when they are harvested, but this can be a problem – as the sweet potato weevil can damage and even cause the potato to rot. Therefore it is important to store the potato in a cool dry place.

It is a carbohydrate – that is, quick energy. It can be used to occasionally replace *Nsima*, offering a relatively cheap alternative and breaking the monotony.

Besides being high in carbohydrates, the sweet potato is also high in vitamin A. According to the Project Healthy Children website, in 2009, vitamin A deficiency in the country affected nearly a quarter of infants between the ages of six to 36 months. Vitamin A deficiency restricts growth, weakens immunity and eyesight and contributes to high infant mortality. Therefore, eating sweet potatoes help our bodies with Vitamin A.

But while all sweet potatoes are a good source of energy and vitamins C, E, K (and several B vitamins), most of the white-fleshed varieties, and even the commonly grown yellow-fleshed 'Kenya' variety, have no significant levels of vitamin A.

The sweet potato leaves can also be eaten,

providing additional protein, vitamins and minerals. The leaves are called *Kholowa* when cooked and eaten as vegetables; providing significant protein and other nutrients.

Sweet potatoes contain antioxidants, which are compounds in plants that protect your cells from damage. A 2008 study published in the "Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture" reports that sweet potatoes might reduce cholesterol levels, which can reduce your risk of heart disease.

Sweet potatoes are also a good source of magnesium, which is the relaxation and anti-stress mineral. Magnesium is necessary for healthy arteries, blood, bones, heart, muscles, and nerve function.

Conduct an interview with farmers who grow sweet potatoes in your area. What has been their experience with the crop? How do they store their sweet potatoes to keep them from spoiling? Are they happy with their sweet potato crop? What suggestions do they have for other farmers?

Interview an agricultural expert from your area; ask him/her about the cultivation of sweet potatoes in responding to climate change effects.

Interview a health expert/nutritionist on the health benefits of eating sweet potatoes.

Do a call in show and get listeners to describe their favorite sweet potato recipes.

Useful Contacts

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