

Exporting fresh sweet potatoes to Europe

Sweet potatoes are part of a trending demand for exotic and ethnic food in Europe. The consumption of sweet potatoes has more than doubled over the past 5 years and supermarkets are catering to this trend. As an exporter you can benefit but only if you are compliant with market requirements. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands are responsible for most of the European import of sweet potatoes. More than 80% of the supply to Europe is in the hands of exporters from the United States.

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1. Product description

The sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) is a root vegetable. Despite its name, the sweet potato does not belong to the same family as the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*). There are several kinds of sweet potato with different coloured skin and flesh, for example red, orange and yellow.

The orange flesh varieties are most common in Europe and there are two varieties that cover 95% of the market:

- The American Covington
- The Spanish Beauregrad

Table 1: Combined Nomenclature (CN) commodity codes for sweet potatoes

Number	Product
07142010	Sweet potatoes, fresh, whole, for human consumption
07142090	Sweet potatoes, fresh, chilled, frozen or dried, whether or not sliced or in the form of pellets (excl. fresh whole sweet potatoes used for human consumption)

Source: Eurostat Comext

2. Which European markets offer opportunities for exporters of sweet potatoes?

Strong growth in import volumes as well as in competition

Europe imported 244,000 tonnes of sweet potatoes in 2017, compared to 96,000 in 2013. Sweet potatoes have gained much popularity thanks to a strong promotion in Europe, especially by North American producers which also organize the [International Sweet Potato Week](#) in Europe.

The United States are a strong supplier and this shows in the fast growing import figures in Europe. The import from developing countries is increasing steadily, but still far behind the dominant supply from the United States.

Product promotion will further boost the demand for sweet potatoes, but you can expect more fierce competition from other suppliers such as Egypt, Honduras and southern Europe. See the competition section for more details on supplying countries.

The United Kingdom is the leading importer of sweet potato

In the United Kingdom, as well as in the Netherlands, sweet potatoes have become regular products. Both countries offer a fast developing consumer market. The United Kingdom is a typical end market, (re-)exporting much less than the Netherlands.

The attention for ethnic food and healthy nutrition have contributed to the popularity of sweet potatoes. In fact, they have become so popular in the United Kingdom, they have started to produce a [British-grown variety](#). Other Northern European countries have also started to experiment with local production.

The consumption in these leading countries is a promising sign for future growth in other European countries. The consumption has also taken off in France, Germany and Belgium.

The Netherlands offers an established trade route into Europe

The Netherlands is a logical hub when you want to supply different countries in Europe.

A large quantity of the sweet potatoes entering mainland Europe are traded through the Netherlands. From here sweet potato is distributed to countries such as Germany, France, Sweden, Finland as well as the United Kingdom.

Tips:

Check out the regular news updates of Freshplaza such as the [overview of the global sweet potato market](#).

Use the established trade routes and find an importing partner in the Netherlands in order to supply mainland Europe, or look for opportunities to supply the United Kingdom directly.

Spain supplies Europe from their own production

Spain is increasing the production of sweet potatoes year by year. The country produces for both the domestic consumption and the supply to other European countries. According to Faostat data, Spain produces around 14 thousand tonnes, but considering their exports, this number should be much higher. [Spanish growers](#) have actually become concerned about overproduction.

The export volumes from Spain are lower in July and the beginning of August when the last stocks are running

out and quality is decreasing. Spanish producers are trying to achieve a guaranteed year-round supply by improving storage conditions. The Spanish import from other supplying countries is low, making it only interesting for external suppliers during times of shortage.

Another significant producer in Europe is Portugal with 23,000 tonnes in 2016, but mainly for domestic consumption. Finally, Italy has also increased its production well over 12,000 tonnes.

Tip:

Make sure your product can compete with the quality produce of other suppliers: Optimise your production and logistical processes or focus on different varieties of sweet potatoes.

3. Which trends offer opportunities on the European market for sweet potatoes?

Attention to health and organic food

Consumers in Europe are becoming more aware of health issues and pay more attention to their diet. This trend has a positive impact on the marketing of sweet potatoes. Sweet potatoes are high in vitamins a and c and are considered to be a healthier alternative for regular potatoes.

Thanks to the increased attention to health and environment, there is also a growing interest in organically produced sweet potatoes. The organic supply is increasing, but the volume and export quality is relatively volatile due to the difficulties related to organic production of sweet potatoes.

Tips:

Verify with your buyer the possibilities for supplying organic sweet potatoes. The organic market is often an expertise of specific buyers.

Read more about the principles of organic agriculture on the [website of IFOAM Organics International](#).

Supermarkets promote ethnic and exotic food

Ethnic and exotic vegetables such as sweet potatoes take up more and more shelf space within the European retail. Supermarkets facilitate the marketing of sweet potatoes with cooking suggestions and recipes. Popular dishes include sweet potato fries, soup, mashed potato and even [toast](#).

While in North Western European countries sweet potatoes are on their way of becoming a regular vegetable, the potential as exotic food in most other countries has not yet reached its limit either.

Tip:

Contribute to promotional initiatives of importers, for example with recipes, communication of health benefits or instructions on how to prepare sweet potatoes.

Taste is important

For European consumers, taste is of growing importance. The taste of sweet potato stands out from other tubers and potatoes and can be a unique selling point to the consumer. You must consider consumer experience as an important success factor for your product.

Tips:

Use varieties that fit the consumer expectation. You can focus on the varieties that are sold most often or distinguish yourself by supplying other varieties that are superior in quality and taste.

Ensure that supply chain logistics and transport processes do not affect product taste in any significant way. Using attractive packaging will also distinguish your product.

Consumers expect a sustainable product

Supply chains are becoming more transparent and consumers are well informed about environmental and social issues. They expect your product to have a sustainable approach to production and processing. Remember that negative news in your supply chain can put consumers off.

Buyers act on this by requiring transparency and certifications from your company. Social and environmental certification schemes include actions to strongly reduce and register the use of pesticides, take action on the safety of employees and/or even include price guarantees for producers.

If your certifications are in line with the [Global Social Compliance Programme \(GSCP\)](#) you will have a better chance of being accepted by European supermarkets.

Tips:

Check the [GSCP](#) website for more information about social and environmental conduct.

Read more about [which trends offer opportunities on the European fresh fruit and vegetable market](#) on the CBI market intelligence platform.

4. What requirements should fresh sweet potato comply with to be allowed on the European market?

What legal and non-legal requirements must your product comply with?

Minimise pesticides

Pesticide residues are one of the crucial issues for fruit and vegetable suppliers. To avoid health and environmental damage, the European Union has set maximum residue levels (MRLs) for pesticides in and on food products. Products containing more pesticides than allowed will be withdrawn from the European market.

Note that buyers in several Member States such as the United Kingdom, Germany, The Netherlands and Austria, use MRLs which are stricter than the MRLs laid down in European legislation. Supermarket chains are the strictest and manage 33 to 70% of the legal MRL.

Tips:

Use the European [MRL database](#) to find out the MRLs that are relevant for sweet potato. You can search the database for your product or the pesticide used and find the list of the MRLs associated with your product or pesticide.

Reduce the amount of pesticides by applying [integrated pest management](#) (IPM) in production. IPM is an agricultural pest control strategy that includes growing practices and chemical management.

Read more about [MRLs at the EU Export Helpdesk](#) and always check with your buyers if they have additional requirements on MRLs and pesticide use.

Plant Health

Fruit and vegetables exported to the European Union must comply with European legislation on plant health. The European Union has laid down [phytosanitary requirements](#) to prevent introduction and spread of organisms harmful to plants and plant products in Europe. These requirements are managed by the competent food safety authorities in the importing and exporting countries.

Tips:

Verify with the [National Plant Protection Organisation](#) or food safety authority in your country if and under which conditions you can export chilli peppers to Europe. These authorities normally work with international standards, but always check with your buyer as well.

Read more about [plant health at the EU Export Helpdesk](#).

Quality

For sweet potatoes there are no official quality requirements. Therefore the minimum requirements of the [General Marketing Standards of Regulation \(EU\) 543/2011](#) apply.

The general marketing standards state that products shall be:

- Intact and sound;
- clean, practically free of any visible foreign matter;
- practically free from pests;
- practically free from damage caused by pests affecting the flesh;
- free of abnormal external moisture;
- free of any foreign smell and/or taste.

The condition of the products must be such as to enable them:

- to withstand transport and handling;
- to arrive in satisfactory condition at the place of destination.

As a reference you can also consult the [United States standard for grades of sweet potatoes](#) that has been drawn up in the United States.

Conformity checks are part of European [Regulation \(EC\) No. 1580/2007](#). In the event of non-compliance your

product can be rejected. In certain third countries local inspection bodies are allowed to carry out pre-export checks.

Tip:

Make sure you supply the quality as agreed in the product specifications and discuss with your buyer which additional certificates are required. These requirements vary between countries and market segments.

Size

There are no specific standards for size in Europe.

An indication of such standards is provided by the United States Department of Agriculture in the [standard for grades of sweet potatoes](#). The United States represent a large share of the worldwide supply.

Packaging

Packaging requirements for sweet potatoes differ between customers and market segments. They must at least be packed to protect the produce properly, in new, clean and quality packaging to prevent damage to the product.

- For wholesale, sweet potatoes are packaged in cardboard boxes or crates. These boxes can vary in size. Six or ten kilogram boxes are often used.
- In European retail outlets, sweet potatoes are usually sold out of the wholesale box or in plastic crates. More recently, sweet potatoes have become available in consumer packing (sealed plastic).

Discuss packaging requirements with your buyer.

Tip:

See also the [Recommended International Code of Practice for Packaging and Transport of Tropical Fresh Fruits and Vegetables \(CAC/RCP 44-1995\)](#).

Labelling

Food placed on the European market must meet the legislation on food labelling.

On the label or marking of each box should at least be the following information:

- Name and physical address of the packer and/or dispatcher;
- Product name;
- Country of origin;
- Commercial specifications: Class, size and weight;
- Traceability code (for example [Global Location Number](#));
- Officially recognised code mark such as a GlobalGap Number (GGN) (recommendable);

The name and address of the packer or dispatcher can be replaced by an official control mark.

For pre-packages you must also:

- Include the name and the address of a seller established within the European Union with the mention 'Packed for:' or an equivalent mention.
- Use a language that is understandable by the consumers of the country of destination.

For organic produce you must include the European [organic logo](#) and the code number of the control authorities.

Tip:

For detailed information on labelling, see the [Codex Alimentarius on food labelling](#) for the labelling of pre-packaged foods and the European [Regulation \(EU\) No 1169/2011 on the provision of food information to consumers](#).

Export procedures

Familiarise yourself with the procedures before planning your exports to the European Union. Failure to follow the right procedures could cause decrease and delay of orders, increase costs and result in actions by European enforcement authorities. Make sure that the accompanying documents correspond (from A-Z!) with the food products contained in the consignment.

Tips:

Consult the [EU Trade Helpdesk](#) for a full list of requirements for vegetables, including sweet potato, selecting the product code: 07142010

Read the general information about [what requirements fresh fruit or vegetables should comply with to be allowed on the European market](#) on the CBI marketing intelligence platform.

5. What additional requirements do buyers often have?

Certification as guarantee

Since food safety is a top priority in all European food sectors, you can expect most buyers to request extra guarantees from you in the terms of certification.

The most commonly requested certification is [GLOBALG.A.P.](#), a pre-farm-gate standard that covers the whole agricultural production process, from before the plant is in the ground to the non-processed product (processing is not covered).

Whether GLOBALG.A.P. is strictly required also depends on the destination country, market conditions and market channel. Northern Europe has become nearly impossible to supply without GLOBALG.A.P. since it is a standard requirement for practically all supermarkets.

Examples of other food safety management systems that can be required are:

- [BRC](#) (British Retail Consortium)

- [IFS](#) (International Food Standard)
- [FSSC22000](#) (Food Safety System Certification)
- [SQF](#) (Safe Quality Food Programme)

These management systems are supplemental to GLOBALG.A.P. and are recognised by the [Global Food Safety Initiative \(GFSI\)](#).

Tips:

Identify the food-safety management systems that are usually requested in your target market. Expect GLOBALG.A.P. to be one of them.

Read more on the various food-safety management systems at the [Standards Map](#) website.

Always remember that food safety is a major issue. Work proactively with buyers to improve food safety, taking care to be transparent and remain up to date with regard to buyer requirements and regulations.

Social and environmental compliance

There is growing attention in Europe for the social and environmental conditions in producing areas. Most European buyers have a social code of conduct which they expect suppliers to adhere to. Social compliance is important, although product quality has top priority.

It can be a plus to be [GRASP](#) certified. GRASP is a social add-on of GLOBALG.A.P. and an accessible certification that is gaining importance in Europe.

Another good option is implementing standards recognised by the [Sustainability Initiative Fruit and Vegetables \(SIFAV\)](#), which consists of an initiative from traders and retailers to become 100% sustainable in sourcing from Latin America, Africa and Asia by 2020.

Tips:

Examine your company's current performance, for example by completing a self-assessment on the [amfori/BSCI website](#).

For a complete overview of buyer initiatives for social compliance, see the [buyer requirements for fresh fruit and vegetables](#) on the CBI marketing intelligence platform.

6. What are the requirements for niche markets?

A growing niche market for organic sweet potatoes

An increasing number of consumers prefer food products that are produced and processed by natural methods. The market for organic sweet potatoes is still small, but with a growing demand and limited supply.

In order to market organic products in Europe, you have to use organic production methods according to [EU legislation](#). Furthermore, you have to use these production methods for at least two years before you can market the vegetables as organic.

In addition, you (or your importer) must apply for an import authorisation from organic control bodies. After

being audited by an accredited certifier, you may put the [EU organic logo](#) on your products, as well as the logo of the standard holder, such as the [Soil Association](#) (especially relevant in the United Kingdom), [Naturland](#) (Germany) or [BioSuisse](#) (Switzerland). Some of these standards differ slightly, but they all comply with the European legislation on organic production and labelling.

Tips:

Assess the market potential before making any investments in organic supply; implementing organic production and becoming certified can be expensive.

For the export of organic sweet potatoes to the European market, use a specialised importer, who understands the market and has access to this niche market. Use, for example, the [Organic-Bio](#) database to find these specialised importers.

7. What competition do you face on the European sweet potato market?

Minor producing countries can be successful

Worldwide, sweet potatoes are almost exclusively produced for domestic consumption. Only a very small percentage (less than 1%) is exported to other regions in the world. A large share of the production is destined for animal feed. The sweet potatoes that are exported are generally for human consumption.

China dominates the worldwide production, followed by Nigeria and Tanzania. Despite of being large producers, they are not necessarily your main competitors in supplying the European market.

You can still find opportunities when supplying from minor producing countries. Among these are countries such as Israel, Honduras, South Africa and Senegal, where exporters manage to be successful on the European market thanks to the right timing and quality.

Exporters from the United States are the main competitors

Exporters from the United States have a major share of the supply to Europe. They have invested in varieties, quality storage and logistical processes, and are able to export throughout the year.

Sweet potatoes from the United States generally have orange flesh. Sweet potatoes with red skin and white flesh, exported to the European market, mainly come from Israel, Honduras, China and Egypt. The increasing demand in Europe has also provided opportunities to other suppliers.

Egypt has a price-competitive supply and a close logistical route through southern Europe.

Honduras has worked on its international reputation and is increasing its year round supply to Europe.

Israel manages relatively high yields and successfully finds suitable supply windows into Europe.

Senegal is an upcoming supplier to the European market.

European production increases

In Europe, sweet potatoes are mostly grown in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece. Due to the increasing demand, producers in Northern Europe have also started to cultivate sweet potato on a small scale. Portugal and Spain

are the largest producers with around 20 to 25 thousand tonnes per year each, but both countries are expected to produce more than 30 thousand tonnes per year soon.

The production in Spain is believed to be increasing in recent years. According to [news sources](#) their main produced varieties are California, Beauregard and Georgia Jets. In Northern Europe the latter two as well as the American Covington are most in demand.

When exporting sweet potatoes during the Spanish season, where harvest starts in august, you will experience more competition than off season. But also Egypt will be in the market with competitive prices. These developments in supply are expected to put pressure on the sweet potato prices.

Buyers source according to the seasons

Your buyer will likely prefer to have a year round supply of sweet potatoes, especially when he is working with retail contracts. Therefore they carefully choose their suppliers and buy according the seasons to obtain the best quality.

You can try to extend your season through excellent storage conditions, but this can be very challenging when competing with the competitors from in-season supplying countries.

Tips:

Read the [tips for doing business with European buyers](#) on the CBI market intelligence platform.

Extending quality standards hamper market entry

Entering the European market is a big hurdle for many companies, primarily because of certification and meeting buyer requirements. Over the past years the supply and competition in sweet potatoes have increased dramatically. Therefore as a supplier you have to deal with higher quality standards than before.

Large retailers prefer larger suppliers because of supply certainty and compliance with quality requirements. As a supplier of sweet potatoes to European retailers you are not in a position to argue about the rules of the game. Your buyer will switch easily to other suppliers if expectations are not met.

Tips:

Contact an experienced importer before entering the European market, especially if you are aiming for major retailers.

Establish a credible track record including transparent information on your company and product quality. Being part of a stable partnership and a trustworthy supplier can help you to establish and maintain your position on the market.

Work together as a sector in your country in order to combine individual harvests and offer larger volumes, enabling you to supply interesting larger trade channels such as supermarkets.

Sweet potatoes compete with less exotic potatoes

Inclusion of ethnic vegetables in the regular supermarket assortments stimulates the diversity of vegetable

consumption in Europe. This offers opportunities for products such as sweet potato. Sweet potato competes with regular potatoes, which are cheaper but also less exclusive.

Tip:

Use storytelling (for example, show its origin and producer), novel packaging and premium quality as methods to distinguish your product.

8. Through which trade channels can you get sweet potatoes on the European market?

Different trade channels in European countries

In Europe there are differences between the compositions of market channels. Northern countries like Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Belgium have a very dominant retail channel. France and Spain go beyond that with large hypermarkets, alongside smaller specialist shops. Countries in the Alpine region, such as Switzerland and Austria, are more favourably disposed towards small local shops.

As an exporter, you will encounter different preferences and requirements whereas trade channels are often country specific.

Supply directly to retail chains

Supermarket chains are interested in establishing direct supply chains. Suppliers that are well organized and able to supply a reliable volume have the option to offer their sweet potatoes almost directly to retailers. They often require you to include extra services such as consumer packaging and logistics through a service partner.

If you cannot comply with a high service level or guaranteed supply contracts, it is best to work with an importer.

Tip:

Participate in major retail programmes, as these offer opportunities to improve your position on the European market. To realise this you must have a reliable supply and select a partner that is a service provider to large supermarkets.

Specialised importers

There are specialised importers in the European market that deal with exotic roots and tubers. These importers can help you get your sweet potatoes into supermarkets and wholesale markets. Working closely with an experienced importer is also a good way to reach many different segments such as smaller shops and restaurants.

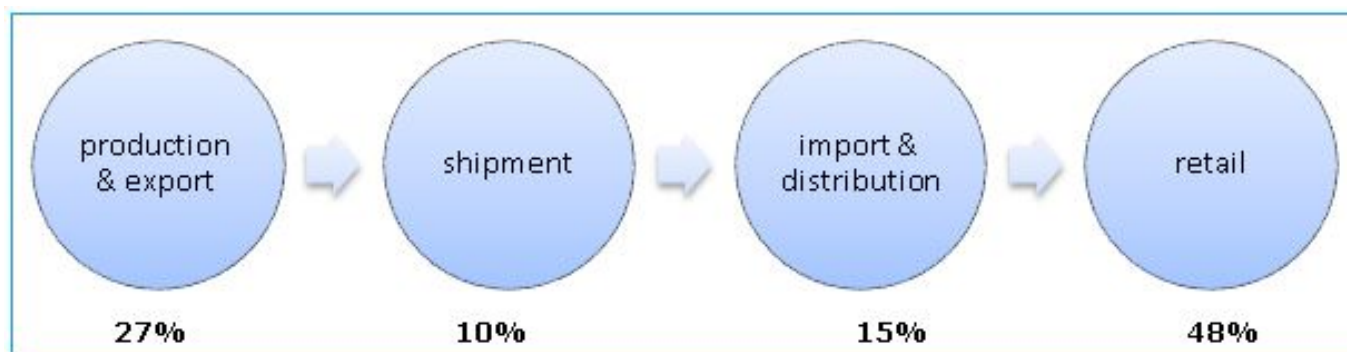
Tips:

Visit or participate in trade fairs such as the [Fruit Logistica](#) in Berlin in order to find importers of exotic roots and tubers.

Read the [tips for finding buyers on the European fresh fruit and vegetables market](#) on the CBI market intelligence platform.

9. What are the end-market prices for sweet potatoes?

Figure 5: Consumer price breakdown for sweet potatoes



European consumer prices for fresh sweet potatoes generally vary between €2 and €3 per kilo. These prices may fluctuate according to variations in demand and supply.

Organic sweet potatoes are sold with a premium between 50 and 100%.


Tips:


Find information about consumer prices in online shops or produce ranges of supermarket chains such as [Tesco](#), [Albert Heijn](#) (search for 'zoete aardappel') and [Carrefour](#) (search for 'patate douce').


Be aware that retail prices and premiums do not reflect the trade prices for sweet potatoes.

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