CBI Product Factsheet:

Fresh Sweet Potatoes in Europe
Introduction

The European market for sweet potato is relatively small but growing considerably. The import and consumption are rapidly expanding, increasing by more than 100% over the last five years. European supermarkets are catering to a growing demand of exotic and ethnic food. Important destinations in Europe are the United Kingdom and the Netherlands; the latter being the main hub for the rest of Europe. The USA withholds a 70% market share in the supply of sweet potatoes. Opportunities are there for suppliers from developing countries with differentiated or competitive products.

Product Definition

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 two main types of sweet potato are: dry flesh types and moist flesh types. Sweet potatoes are grown in tropical and warm temperate regions. The crop is sensitive to both frost and drought.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Product</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>07142010</td>
<td>Sweet potatoes, fresh, whole, for human consumption</td>
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<tr>
<td>07142090</td>
<td>Sweet potatoes, fresh, chilled, frozen or dried, whether or not sliced or</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in the form of pellets (excl. fresh whole sweet potatoes used for human</td>
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<td></td>
<td>consumption)</td>
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</table>

Source: Eurostat Comext.

Product Specification

This section provides you with general information on requirements and trade standards regarding quality, size, packaging and labelling. For more specific information it is always advisable to contact your buyer. Additional information on marketing standards can be found on the CBI Market Intelligence Platform.

Quality

- For sweet potatoes no specific requirements are stated for sizes or quality in the *Codex Alimentarius*, the ‘Food code’ of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The General Marketing Standards of Regulation (EU) 543/2011 apply. As a reference you can have a look at the US standard for grades of sweet potatoes that has been created in the United States.
- European quality standards in Regulation (EC) No. 1580/2007 explain that imports of fresh fruit and vegetables from third countries must comply with the marketing or equivalent standards. Checks on conformity must be carried out before these goods enter Community customs territory, except in the case of small lots which the inspection authorities/bodies consider to be low risk. In certain third countries which provide satisfactory guarantees of conformity, pre-export checks may be carried out by the inspection bodies of these third countries.

Size and packaging

- There are no rules on size. General size classes are baby, small, medium (1 or 2 Layer) and Extra Large.
- 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. Discuss your customers’ packaging requirements with them.
- 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 also become available in consumer packing (sealed plastic).
- See also the Recommended International Code of Practice for Packaging and Transport of Tropical Fresh Fruits and Vegetables (CAC/RCP 44-1995).

Labelling

- Consumer package labelling must be in accordance with the rules and regulations applying in the European market. Labels cannot contain any toxic ink or glue. See the Codex General Standard for the Labelling of Pre-packaged Foods or Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 on the provision of food information to consumers. If the nature of the produce is
not visible from the outside, the package must be labelled with the name of the product, and (optional) the name of the variety and/or commercial name.

- The following items should be on the label of (pre-packed) fresh vegetables:
  - the name under which the product is sold;
  - the commercial identification: class, size (code), number of units, net weight;
  - name and address of the producer;
  - packager or seller established within Europe;
  - place/country of origin.

- The new Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 establishes the general principles, requirements and responsibilities governing food information, and in particular food labelling. It lays down the methods for guaranteeing the right of consumers to access information, and procedures for the provision of food information, taking into account the need to provide sufficient flexibility to respond to future developments and new information requirements.

- For more information on labelling, packaging and quality see also: Codex Alimentarius and the CBI Market Intelligence Platform for Fresh Fruit and Vegetables.

What is the demand for fresh sweet potato in Europe?

General information about trade developments in the European market for fresh fruit and vegetables are provided on the CBI Market Intelligence Platform.

This section provides you with more detailed statistics about trade and consumption of fresh sweet potatoes in Europe.

**Imports**

**Figure 1: European import volume of sweet potatoes, in 1,000 tonnes**

![European import volume of sweet potatoes](image)

Source: Market Access Database
Interpretations and opportunities

- Total imports of sweet potatoes in the European market amounted to 175 thousand tonnes in 2015, which is an increase of 41% compared to 2014. Around 39 thousand tonnes originated in developing countries and their supply has increased at a slower rate than the supply from developed countries (mainly USA).
- With respectively 135 and 59 thousand tonnes the United Kingdom and the Netherlands are the largest importers of sweet potatoes. Both countries show significant import growth. The United Kingdom mainly imports for the home market. The Netherlands is also a trade hub for other European countries.
- The European market is dominated by the suppliers from the USA with a steady market share of around 70%. The USA have a year round supply of orange-flesh sweet potatoes and logistical processes are well developed.
- In 2015 Europe also imported sweet potatoes from countries such as Egypt (9 thousand tonnes), Honduras (10 thousand) and Israel (9 thousand) and smaller amounts between 1 and 3 thousand tonnes from Senegal, South Africa and Brazil.
- Importers in the European market favour larger producers, such as in the USA, because of supply certainty. However, increased imports from other parts of the world prove that there is room for other suppliers.
- The supply from Israel is in an upward trend again since 2012 and the import from Egypt boomed from a stable 3 to 4 thousand tonnes to nearly 10 thousand tonnes in 2015. The volumes from Honduras and Senegal only a decade ago are negligible compared to their current export to Europe.

Tips:

- 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.
- Find a European importer at fairs such as Fruit Logistica.
- Use Fresh Plaza as a starting point if you are looking for current relevant information in the market for fresh fruits and vegetables, including sweet potatoes.
Exports

Figure 3: European export volume of sweet potatoes, in 1,000 tonnes

Source: Market Access Database

Figure 4: Main European exporters of sweet potatoes, in 1,000 tonnes

Source: ITC Trademap

Interpretations and opportunities

- Total European exports of sweet potatoes to non-European countries is increasing but in 2015 only amounted to 2.3 thousand tonnes. This includes mainly the export volume to Switzerland and Norway.
- The Netherlands is the biggest trade hub in Europe for sweet potatoes. Main destinations are Germany, France, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom mainly re-exports sweet potatoes to Ireland. The rest is for domestic consumption.
- The Netherlands only exports sweet potatoes that have been imported from other countries, both from European and non-European suppliers. There is no production which makes the Netherlands an important trade hub for sweet potatoes.
- Spain exports almost year-round to other European countries, although volumes are lower in July and August when stocks are falling and quality is decreasing.
Interpretations and opportunities

Worldwide production of sweet potatoes slightly exceeded 100 million tonnes in 2014. In general, only 50% of the world’s production of sweet potatoes is for human consumption. The remaining half is used for animal feed and seed conservation. Given the low prices for feed, the option to compete internationally with other feed ingredients such as maize and soy is non-existent.

Worldwide, sweet potatoes are almost exclusively produced for domestic consumption. Only a very small percentage (less than 1%) of production is exported to other regions in the world.

China is by far the largest producer of sweet potatoes with over 70 million tonnes in 2014, followed by Tanzania, Nigeria (both over 3 million tonnes), Ethiopia (fast growing, 2.7 million tonnes), Indonesia, Angola and Uganda (all around 2 million tonnes). Despite of the high production volumes world-wide, the United states remains the main supplier to Europe, with a national production of 1.3 million tonnes in 2014.

Countries with a relative small production of sweet potatoes still have potential to supply the European market. Smaller producing countries such as Israel, Honduras, South Africa and Senegal manage to be successful in exporting to the European market thanks to the right timing and quality.

Sweet potatoes from the USA 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.

In Europe, the production of sweet potatoes amounted to about 56 thousand tonnes in 2014. Spain and Portugal are the largest producers with 22 thousand tonnes each. Greece and Italy together produce another 11 thousand tonnes.
Consumption

Figure 6: European calculated consumption of sweet potatoes, in 1,000 tonnes

Interpretations and opportunities

- In total, consumption of sweet potatoes in Europe is estimated to have reached 190 thousand tonnes in 2014. Consumption increased significantly in the last five years, almost completely based on imports.
- Sweet potatoes are primarily popular with ethnic consumers, and are therefore still considered a minor product in Europe. However, they have also become a standard product in many European supermarkets, reaching a larger variety of consumers. The increasing consumption of sweet potato offers opportunities to increase export to Europe.

What trends offer opportunities on the European market for sweet potatoes?

CBI Trend mapping provides you with general trends in the European market for fresh fruits and vegetables. This section provides more details about specific trends in the market for sweet potatoes.

Growing interest in sustainable vegetables: Consumption of fresh produce in Europe is developing towards a more sustainable approach to production and processing. Environmental and social issues are becoming more and more important. 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. Certification schemes that are in line with the Global Social Compliance Program (GSCP) will have a higher chance of being accepted by European supermarkets.

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.

Tip:
- Participate in large 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.

Tip:
- Check the Global Social Compliance Program (GSCP) website for more information about social and environmental conduct.
Attention to health and organic food: Consumers in Europe are becoming more aware of health issues and pay more attention to their diet. Sweet potatoes are high in vitamins and offer a healthier alternative to regular potatoes. Thanks to the increased attention to health and environment, there is also a growing interest in organically produced sweet potatoes. The demand for organic sweet potato is growing, but the supply volume and export quality is relatively volatile in many countries due to the difficulty of producing organically.

Tips:
- If your climate is suitable for organic cultivation, verify with your buyer the possibilities for supplying organic sweet potatoes.
- Read more about organic farming on the Soil Association website.

More ethnic food in supermarkets: More and more shelf space within the European retail is given to ethnic food. This involves niche and special vegetables, often with Asian origins, being offered to European consumers. While consumers are becoming more familiar with ethnic vegetables, the demand for sweet potato will increase as well. Large retailers prefer larger suppliers because of supply certainty and compliance with quality requirements.

Tips:
- 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.
- As many European consumers are prepared to try 'new' products, 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.

Tip:
- Make sure that supply chain logistics and transport processes do not affect product taste in any significant way.

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

Buyer requirements can be divided into (1) musts, requirements you must meet in order to enter the market, such as legal requirements, (2) common requirements, which are those most of your competitors have already implemented, in other words, the ones you need to comply with in order to keep up with the market, and (3) niche market requirements for specific segments.

For general information see also the buyer requirements for fresh fruit and vegetables on the CBI Market Intelligence Platform for fresh fruit and vegetables.

Requirements you must meet

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.
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. The requirements mainly imply that:

- Certain listed organisms are not allowed to be imported into Europe, unless specific circumstances apply. European control measures are subject to change.

Contaminants

Contaminants are substances that have not been intentionally added to food, but which may be present as a result of the various stages of its production, packaging, transport or warehousing. To avoid negative impact on the quality of food and risks to human health, the European Union has set limits for several contaminants.

Control of food imported to the European Union

To ensure food safety and avoid environmental damage, the European Union has restricted the use of certain chemicals in several Regulations and Directives. Your products will be subjected to official controls. These controls are carried out to ensure that all foods marketed in the European market are safe, that is, in compliance with the requirements applicable to them. There are three types of checks:

a) Documentary checks
b) Identity checks
c) Physical checks

In the event of repeated non-compliance of specific products originating from particular countries, the European Union can decide that controls will be carried out on an increased level or lay down emergency measures. Controls can be carried out at all stages of import and marketing in Europe. However, most checks are done at the points of entry in the European Union.

Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein are not European Union members, but are part of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). Their food laws are to a large extent identical with European legislation. However, some aspects of legislation may differ. For example, in Switzerland, import checks are the responsibility of the Swiss Customs Administration and the Federal Office of Public Health.
Common buyer requirements

Certification as guarantee

As food safety is a top priority in all European food sectors, you can expect most buyers to request extra guarantees from you in form of certification. **GlobalG.A.P.** is the most commonly requested food safety certification scheme, essential for exporting sweet potatoes to Europe, especially via supermarkets. **GLOBALG.A.P.** is 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 not covered).

Examples of other food safety management systems that can be required are **British Retail Consortium (BRC)** and **International Food Standard (IFS)**, **FSSC22000** or **SQF**. These management systems are additional to **GLOBALG.A.P.** and are recognised by the **Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI)**.

**Tips:**

- 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.
- Read more about health control in the EU Export Helpdesk.
- Consult the EU Export Helpdesk for a full list of requirements for vegetables, including sweet potato, selecting the product code: 07142010

Quality standards

The General European Marketing Standards also apply to sweet potatoes. European buyers often require compliance with the standards of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) or the **Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC)**. It should be noted that quality refers to both food safety and food quality.

**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.

Niche markets: Organic and Fair trade requirements

Organic, a growing niche market

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 European importer) must apply for an import authorisation from European organic control bodies. After being audited by an accredited certifier, you may put the European Union organic logo on your products, as well as the logo of the standard holder (for example, **Soil Association** (especially relevant in the United Kingdom), **Naturland** (Germany) or **Bio Suisse** (Switzerland)). Some of these standards are slightly different, but they all comply with the European legislation on organic production and labelling.
A small, but growing, niche market is the market for fresh products produced with more attention for social and/or environmental conditions in the producing areas. For sweet potato social compliance is important, although product quality is top priority. Examples of social or sustainable labels for fresh fruit and vegetables are Fairtrade, Fair for Life and the Rainforest Alliance Certification Scheme.

European buyers can adopt initiatives which may impact you as a supplier. For example the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) in the United Kingdom, or the Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI) in North-Western Europe increase the importance of social compliance.

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

For general information about market competitiveness for fresh fruit and vegetables you can have a look at the Market Competitiveness information available at the CBI market intelligence platform. The platform also provides tips for doing business with European buyers.

This section provides information about the market competitiveness of the European market for fresh sweet potato.

Company competition: Rivalry is fierce in the trade of vegetables, so suppliers of fresh vegetables to European retailers are not in a position to argue about the rules of the game. Buyers will switch easily to other suppliers if expectations are not met. However, in Europe sweet potato is not a main vegetable for which fierce competition is common, and the local production is not sufficient to meet the demand. This slightly improves the position of exporters from developing countries.

Market entry: Entering the European market is a big hurdle for many companies, primarily because of certification and meeting both legal and non-legal requirements.

Product competition: Inclusion of ethnic vegetables in the regular supermarket assortments stimulates the diversity of vegetable consumption in Europe, offering opportunities for products such as sweet potato. Sweet potato competes with regular potatoes, which are cheaper but also less exclusive.

Tips:
- Contact an experienced importer before entering the European market, especially if you are aiming for large retailers. It is expected that supermarkets will include ethnic vegetables in their regular assortment. However, delivering to supermarkets is very demanding in terms of buyer requirements.
- Establish a credible track record including transparent information on your company and product quality. Being part of a stable partnership and being a trustworthy supplier can help you to establish and maintain your position on the market.
- Use storytelling (for example, show its origin and producer), novel packaging and premium quality as methods for setting your product apart.
What do the trade channels and interesting market segments look like in Europe for fresh sweet potatoes?

For more general information about market channels and segments you can have a look at the Market Channels and Segments document available at the CBI market intelligence platform. This section provides some information about the various marketing channels through which fresh sweet potatoes are marketed in Europe.

Interpretations and opportunities

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.

Tip:
- Make sure your standards are sufficient for the supply to supermarkets. See the buyer requirements and assessment tools in the section above.

What are end market prices for sweet potato?

Consumer prices for fresh sweet potato vary between 1,5 and 2,5 euros per kilo. Organic sweet potato is sold for more than double that price.
Useful Sources

Export and market entry support:
- CBI - [http://www.cbi.eu/](http://www.cbi.eu/)
- CBI market studies on fresh fruit and vegetables - [http://www.cbi.eu/marketintel_platform/Fresh-Fruit-Vegetables/136122/mar](http://www.cbi.eu/marketintel_platform/Fresh-Fruit-Vegetables/136122/mar)

Certification schemes:
- British Retail Consortium (BRC) - [http://www.brcglobalstandards.com/](http://www.brcglobalstandards.com/)
- FAIRTRADE - [http://www.fairtrade.net/](http://www.fairtrade.net/)
- GLOBALG.A.P - [http://www.globalgap.org/uk_en/](http://www.globalgap.org/uk_en/)

Marketing and trade standards:

Statistics and sector information:
- Fruitrop - [http://www.fruitrop.com](http://www.fruitrop.com) (publication of CIRAD)
- Freshfel - [http://www.freshfel.org](http://www.freshfel.org)
- Freshplaza - [http://www.freshplaza.com](http://www.freshplaza.com)

Tip:
- Find information about consumer prices in online shops or assortments of supermarket chains such as Tesco, Albert Heijn or Carrefour (search for ‘patate douce’).