

SATSUMA-IMO**The Japanese Sweet Potato****ROOTS**

The *Satsuma-imo* or Japanese sweet potato, originated in the region of Mexico and Guatemala and was a common crop earlier than 3000 BC. It was brought to Europe in the fifteenth century by Christopher Columbus, and was introduced from Spain into China at the end of the sixteenth century.



After that, the sweet potato was brought from China through the Ryukyu Islands, Tanegashima and Satsuma, at the southern tip of Japan. In the mid-Edo period, Konyo Aoki, a scholar of Western studies, began cultivating the plant in the Kanto region, and soon it was a wide-spread crop. The Japanese name "*Satsuma-imo*" is derived from the fact that the Satsuma (Kagoshima) region was the one in which this vegetable was raised. It is well known that the *Satsuma-imo* helped many people survive during a time when food was scarce in Japan. Later, many new varieties were created to satisfy the tastes of the Japanese. In the U.S., the *Satsuma-imo* is called "Japanese yam" to distinguish it from the sweet potato. In Japan, *Satsuma-imo* goes by other names too. It is called "*kara-imo*" or "*ryukyu-imo*" in the Satsuma (Kagoshima) region and "*hmu*" or "*kara-imo*" in the Ryukyu (Okinawa) region. In the six centuries after Columbus brought *Satsuma-imo* to Europe, it has traveled around the globe, being named after the regions where it was cultivated. Thus it was transformed into the delicious *Satsuma-imo* we enjoy today.

NUTRITIONAL VALUE

The *Satsuma-imo*, which is abundant in starch and sugar, is also rich in calcium, Vitamin C, potassium and dietary fiber. Its vitamin C content is comparable to grapefruit, and is also resistant to heat. The type with yellow flesh contains carotene. When the *Satsuma-imo* is cut, a slimy white substance appears on the surface. This is called jalapin, a resin component that aids in digestion. Jalapin works together with dietary fiber, which explains why eating *Satsuma-imo* can relieve constipation. When cooked at 160 to 180 degrees F for several hours, *Satsuma-imo*'s natural sweetness and sugar content are increased through enzymatic action, making it even more delicious.

SEASON

Since the *Satsuma-imo* is available all year around, it is hard to tell when it is in season. In the U.S., the greatest production centers in Livingston, California. The first crops arrive on the market in early August, but full-fledged harvest starts in September, when the product is at its best. The harvesting period lasts until March or so, after which the *Satsuma-imo* you see on the market are generally taken from cold storage.

A highly popular *Satsuma-imo* called "*Beniazuma*" and "*Benikomachi*" have bright yellow skin and light yellow flesh. "*Nakamurasaki*," which has a brownish yellow skin and purple flesh, has a more refined flavor and pronounced sweetness. Thanks to its abundant carotene, it is one of today's most popular varieties. It is ideal for use in dishes like *Kinton* (sweet mashed Japanese yam), and *Imo Yokan* (a block-shaped cake made of Japanese yam)

RECIPE FOR CANDIED JAPANESE YAMS.

Ingredients (serves 4)

1 large *Satsuma imo*

Cooking oil for deep-frying

Black sesame seeds for garnish

Sauce

½ cup sugar

1 teaspoon soy sauce

¼ cup water

½ teaspoon sesame seed oil

Directions:

1. Cut the yam into 2-inch thick (about 2 inch long) slices. Peel the skin deeply, and set the skin aside. Cut the yam lengthwise into six to eight equal parts of half-moon shape. Slice the skin into strips of equal length and immerse together with the yam in salted water (as salty as seawater). Pat dry.
2. Heat oil. Place the yam in oil while the temperature is still low. Gradually increase the temperature and continue frying till crispy.
3. For sauce, in a saucepan heat the sauce ingredients till thickened and bubbly. Remove from heat, drizzle over hot *Satsuma-imo*, and toss to coat.
4. Sprinkle with black sesame seeds and stir gently before serving.

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