

Q&A: Air Potato Vine not hard to manage

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

Q: I have a vine growing in my landscape that produced a crop of weird, Irish potato-like fruit with warts! One vine has grown to the top of a tall cypress tree. What is this vine called and is the fruit edible?

A: Your vine is known as Air Potato Vine but it's also known as Tater Vine in other parts of the South. Air Potato Vine is believed to have been introduced in Florida during the early 1900's as an ornamental. By the early 1970s, it was already recognized as an invasive pest plant throughout that state. Some Florida residents have reckoned it to be worse than Kudzu.

Air Potato Vine has spread westward over the Gulf states and is now in Texas. However, this is not a first reporting of this vigorous-growing vine. It has been many, many years since I've received a phone inquiry on Air Potato Vine so it was a bit surprising to receive two inquiries over the past week.

It does not appear that Air Potato Vine is invasive in our Texas Gulf Coast growing area. In fact, both residents that inquired about the vine also noted while it grows vigorously (60-to-70 feet in length), it has not been difficult to manage.

Air Potato Vine has a winter dormant period and the stems die back to the ground. Air Potato Vine produces large numbers of potato-like, aerial



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

Air Potato Vine is an non-native, introduced vine that can quickly grow 60-to-70 feet in length. It is covered with large, glossy, heart-shaped leaves and produces large numbers of potato-like, aerial tubers along its stems.

tubers along its stems. These air potatoes are grayish, somewhat irregular in shape with distinctive bands of wart-like growths. The tubers drop from vines and grow into new plants over the next growing season.

Now to the question of "Are the tubers edible?" Some reports indicate that the tubers are edible while others report that tubers are poisonous. One gardener noted that even the possums just sniffed and passed on the tubers produced in his rural acreage! I always err on the side of caution when it comes to the consumption of novel foods but if possums past up on a food item, it becomes a no-brainer.

Q: Should I cut back my Miscanthus and other ornamental grasses after they have dried?

A: I was asked this question on several occasions during our recent Ornament and Perennial Plant Sale. More than ever before, gardeners are realizing the fine accent and architectural effect ornamental grasses can contribute to just about any landscape.

There are several approaches to cutting back ornamental grasses. I recommend cutting back ornamental grasses in the spring before new growth emerges. This ensures that their attractiveness in the landscape is utilized throughout all four growing seasons.

I confess that I did not cut



October 17, 2012



Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit his website at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.



back the clumps of purple fountain grass growing aside the water garden near our office. They looked rather tattered for a while as the dry stalks began to fall over near the end of the winter season as new growth emerged in the spring. But by waiting until spring (as the original plan went) visitors could enjoy the striking bloom heads and feathery waves as the wind blew over the winter season.

Since I have made such a public proclamation-of-intent, I will certainly make time to cut back the dried stems and leaves of the purple fountain grasses near the office next spring. I will also be sure to follow my recommendation to cut the clumps back to only 7 to 8 inches from the ground. In case we have a late cold snap, leaving some dried vegetation will help insulate the live vegetation below and avoid die-back of the clump. The old growth will quickly be hidden by the new growth.

Q.: I was surprised to see that my ornamental sweet potato vines produced a bumper crop of what look like real sweet potatoes. Are they edible?

A: Ornamental Sweet Potato Vine (*Ipomoea batatas*), is a true sweet potato complete with underground tubers, but it has bolder, more colorful foliage than its vegetable sibling. Ornamental Sweet Potato Vine will produce sweet potatoes like those we commonly see in the grocery store.

Ornamental Sweet Potato Vine was bred for its ornamental value, not taste or crop yields. Ornamental Sweet Potato Vine has been gaining in popularity with local gardeners. The most commonly used variety in this area is Marguerite. Marguerite produces a maze of eye-catching, chartreuse green, heart-shaped leaves. It's fairly drought tolerant and blends nicely in mixed containers.

One of my gardening friends on Jamaica

Beach has been so pleased with this vine that she utilizes it as groundcover in three very large beds that have performed very well this year despite less than desirable soil conditions. She also reports that this vine also keeps weeds problems down given its dense, shading foliage and rather vigorous growth habit.

So back to your question: The large tubers are edible but most have a poor flavor or even a bitter taste. I recommend growing the regular sweet potato if your main objective is to put sweet potatoes on the dinner table.

