



The Gigantic Sweet Potato
An Educator's Guide

A Picture Book by Dianne de Las Casas
Illustrated by Marita Gentry
Pelican Publishing Company 2010

About the book

When Ma Farmer tries to pull up the gigantic sweet potato in her garden, it's a recipe for disaster. The sweet potato is stuck! So Ma Farmer grabs Pa Farmer and the fun begins. They heave and ho but that sweet potato just won't go! When Bessie Cow tries to help "moovve" the sweet potato, it still refuses to budge. Ralphie Dog joins the party and lends his paws to power the pulling. It's a "ruff" job and still, that sweet potato stays stuck. Kitty Cat comes along and tugs with all her might but that sweet potato sure is stubborn! Finally, itty bitty Lily Mouse offers to help. Though there is doubt, everyone soon learns that a small and mighty effort yields big rewards. There is sweet success at last! This delicious dish of a tale includes Ma Farmer's secret recipe for sweet potato pie. Mmm, mmm, mmm.

"I am delighted to find this precious story full of vivid character and beautiful art. Children will enjoy the story and be encouraged to have delicious fun in the kitchen, especially with the wonderfully nutritious sweet potato!" – Holly Clegg, spokesperson for the Louisiana Sweet Potato Commission and author of the *Trim and Terrific* cookbook series

Watch the book trailer on Dianne's website! <http://www.storyconnection.net>. Click on "Book Activities" and "The Gigantic Sweet Potato."

About the Author



Dianne de Las Casas is a celebrated author, award-winning storyteller, and recording artist. Her children's books and professional titles have received awards and rave reviews. Her CDs *Jump, Jiggle & Jam* and *World Fiesta* have been named *School Library Journal* Audio of the Week recordings. She performs arts-in-education programs and residencies at schools, libraries, festivals, and special events. Dianne is a frequent presenter at the International Reading Association, American Library Association, and other literary and education conferences. The author of *Madame Poulet and Monsieur Roach*, *The Cajun Cornbread Boy*, *Mama's Bayou* and many other books, Dianne lives with her family in the New Orleans area. She loves to cook and enjoys sweet potato pie with a big dollop of whipped cream on top.



About the Illustrator

Marita Gentry is a professional artist and has her own painting and teaching studio, Studio Marita, in southern Louisiana. Her vivid illustrations have earned her numerous awards and commissions. An accomplished teacher, she is involved in several artist-in-residence programs each year, helping schools enliven their walls with magnificent murals. This is the third book she has baked with Dianne de Las Casas. Marita loves sweet treats and thinks pie should be served at every meal!

Interview with the Author, Dianne de Las Casas

How did you come up with the idea for *The Gigantic Sweet Potato*?

I've always loved the story of "The Enormous Turnip," a Russian folktale. I love the funny antics of the animals pulling on each other to get the turnip out of the ground. I was developing a storytelling program of Louisiana-flavored tales and thought the tale would be wonderfully adapted using the sweet potato. They are abundant in Louisiana and happen to be the state's vegetable. I enjoy audience participation so I came up with the fun chant that everyone sings in the story. I design my books to be "Tell Along Tales" so everyone can join in the telling of the story. It's so much fun.

What advice do you have for young authors?

Step 1: Read! Explore the world around you through the power of words. Read as much as you can – both fiction and non-fiction. The more you know about the world, the more you have to write about. **Step 2: Listen!** Listen to the world around you? What do you hear? You could be inspired with a story. **Step 3: Write!** Keep a journal and jot down all your thoughts and ideas. **Step 4: Tell out loud!** I read every story I write out loud. It's important to hear the rhythm of the language. Every story has a "heartbeat" that brings it to life. Reading a story out loud allows you to hear that. **Step 5: Rewrite!** Few stories are born "perfect." The best stories are the ones that have been finely tuned with good editing. Ask someone you trust to read your story and offer suggestions. A good editor is so important!

Interview with the Illustrator, Marita Gentry

What inspires you as an artist?

I am inspired by everyday life and the things I see around me such as animals, my cats, my garden, and my family. Animals as well as people provide great facial expressions through their thoughts and actions. I grew up on a farm so the animals were easy to paint. I love making animals funny so I gave these animals interesting poses and expressions in the story. When I worked on the paintings for *The Gigantic Sweet Potato*, I looked at lots of sweet potatoes and cows! Art is everywhere. Just take a look around.

What advice do you have for young artists?

Draw, draw, draw! Draw things you find around you. Draw what you see. Your art does not have to be realistic. Be okay with your own style. Don't be afraid to stray outside of the lines. You have to learn to break boundaries to really draw. It is also important to use your time in school to

learn what you can. Art is about reading, math, and social studies. Reading makes your imagination more vivid. You have to be aware of the world around you to draw it.

Language Arts

Word Whizzling (Dianne's made-up word for finding words in another word or phrase)

How many words can you whizzle from Sweet Potato? The words have to be 3 or more letters.

We found 30 words but there are more!

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Retelling Tales Writing Exercise

The Gigantic Sweet Potato is a folktale retelling.

- How would you “retell” a folktale? Find a lesser known folktale and rewrite it. Tip: Look in the 398.2 section of the library for folk and fairy tales.
- Take a traditional tale (i.e., Little Red Riding Hood, 3 Little Pigs, Goldilocks & the 3 Bears) and twist the tale. Think of how to “redo” the title (i.e., Goldie Bears & the 3 Locks)

Characters with Character

In *The Gigantic Sweet Potato*, Ma Farmer is trying to pull a stubborn sweet potato out of the ground. Pa Farmer and the other animals help her. They pitch in, demonstrating *teamwork*. In the end, everyone is rewarded with a piece of sweet potato pie. They demonstrate good *character*.

Activity: Create Characters with Character

Name other good character traits. Draw pictures of the people in your family. Next to them, write down their *character traits* (kind, helpful, funny, etc.). Now draw a picture of yourself. Exchange your picture with a partner. Each partner will list *character traits* next to the picture. Discuss what it means to have *good character*.

Activity: Positive Potato Pals

Using the Sweet Potato Pal template in Book Activities (go to <http://www.storyconnection.net> and click on “Book Activities” and “The Gigantic Sweet Potato”), design a Sweet Potato Pal with different character traits. Can others tell what kind of character your Sweet Potato Pal is?

Rhythm & Writing

In *The Gigantic Sweet Potato*, there is a rhythmic chant that appears throughout the book:

“Heave ho! Heave ho! We’ll pull this sweet potato, just a little more to go!”
And they pulled. And they pulled.
But the potato wouldn’t move.

Can you write your own lyrics and set them to a familiar tune? Common songs like “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” and “Jingle Bells” are fun to change around with your own words.

Turbo Tongue Twisters

A *tongue twister* is a phrase that is designed to be difficult to say properly. Some tongue twisters are natural (cinnamon or spaghetti are often tongue twisters for young children) while others are deliberate and used for fun. Example: “sweet cinnamon sprinkles” (Try saying it three times fast without any mistakes!) Can you make up your own turbo tongue twister?

Sweet Sequencing

With your class, do the fun chant “Pile it on the Pie a Mile High,” a sequencing chant and round game I created that kids absolutely love to sing. Here is the link to it on my website.
http://www.storyconnection.net/?content=pile_pie

Math

Cooking Up Some Math

In *The Gigantic Sweet Potato*, Ma Farmer bakes sweet potato pie. Cooking is a great way to learn about math. Cooking teaches geometry, fractions, measurements, addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Here is the recipe for **Ma Farmer’s Sweet Potato Pie**.

Ingredients:

- 1 lb. sweet potatoes, cooked and peeled
- 1/2 cup butter, softened
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 1/4 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 cup sweetened condensed milk
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 tsp. ground nutmeg
- 1/2 tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1 1/2 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 9-inch ready-made unbaked pie shell



Directions:

In mixing bowl, mash sweet potatoes. Add butter. Mix thoroughly. Stir in sugar, brown sugar, condensed milk, eggs, nutmeg, cinnamon, and vanilla. Mix until smooth. Pour into unbaked pie crust. Bake at 350 degrees for 55-60 minutes or until toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Pie will sink as it cools. Serve warm with large dollop of whipped cream. Mmm, mmm, mmm.

Math Challenge:

- What if you wanted to make 2 sweet potato pies? *Double* (X2) the recipe. Write the doubled recipe.
- If you were to cut the sweet potato pie into 8 triangular wedges, how many cuts would you need, cutting across the entire *diameter* of the sweet potato pie? Answer: 4 Activity: Demonstrate this by passing out paper plates to the students. Have them “cut” their sweet potato pie by drawing the wedges.
- Place students in groups of even numbers. Pass out paper plates. Have them figure out how to cut the sweet potato pie into even wedges for everyone in the group.

Create a Recipe and Design a Cookbook

Using the Blank Cookbook template in Book Activities (go to <http://www.storyconnection.net> and click on “Book Activities” and “The Gigantic Sweet Potato”), create a new recipe or write down an old family recipe. Following the directions, cut and fold the paper to create a cool cookbook! The folding requires a little bit of geometry!

Science**Sweet Potato Fun Facts**

- The largest sweet potato producers in the United States are the states of California, Louisiana, Mississippi, and North Carolina. The sweet potato is Louisiana’s state vegetable. The United States Sweet Potato Council is the official national organization for sweet potatoes.
- The sweet potato is not actually a potato. Sweet potatoes are roots. Potatoes are tubers.
- American Indians grew sweet potatoes before Columbus visited in 1492.
- George Washington Carver, a professor and scientist, was born in Missouri in 1864. He helped poor farmers find ways to make greater use of their land by alternating sweet potatoes and peanuts with their cotton crops. He made one hundred new products from sweet potatoes, including flour, ink, starch, synthetic rubber, tapioca, vinegar, postage stamp glue, and five hundred shades of textile dyes.
- Not only do sweet potatoes taste great, they are also good for you. Sweet potatoes provide fiber, folate, potassium, calcium, and vitamin B-6. Plus, they are full of beta-carotene (vitamin A), which is good for your eyesight.

Activity: Plant a Sweet Potato

To start growing a sweet potato, place the pointed end of a sweet potato in a jar of water. Insert toothpicks into the sides of the sweet potato. The toothpicks should form a circle around the top third of the potato so that the top of the potato is exposed to the air. In a few weeks, a vine with stems will sprout. Sweet potatoes enjoy bright, sunny locations. Water weekly and fertilize once a month. The sweet potato vines, or slips, can be planted outside in late May to produce sweet potatoes that can be eaten in the fall.

Fun & Funky Facts about Cows, Mice, Dogs & Cats*Cows:*

- Bessie Cow is a ruminant. Ruminants are cud chewing mammals. Cud is regurgitated, partially digested food. Yum...

- A cow chews cud for up to 8 hours each day.
- Dairy cows provide 90% of the world's milk supply. U.S. cows provide an average of 2,000 gallons of milk per year. Think 30,000 glasses of milk! How much milk do you drink?
- While most people think that cows have 4 stomachs, they do not. What they have are 4 digestive compartments, which is different than having 4 actual stomachs.

Mice:

- Lily Mouse is a field mouse. Field mice live in fields, gardens, swamps & meadows.
- The mouse is one of the smallest mammals. Its scientific name is the *Microtus Pennsylvanicus*.
- Mice are herbivores, which mean they eat plants. They have two kinds of teeth: incisors, which are sharp front teeth used to gnaw on things, and cheeks, which are flat back teeth used for chewing.
- One of the most famous fictional characters in the world is Mickey Mouse.

Dogs:

- Ralphie Dog is a mixed breed. Ma Farmer adopted him from the local SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). You too can adopt a dog. Visit <http://www.spcai.org>.
- Dogs can be traced as far back as 40 million years ago to an animal called the *Miacis*. The *Miacis* evolved into the *Tomarctus*, a predecessor of the genus *Canis*. This genus includes the wolf, the jackal, and the dog.
- Dog is often called "man's best friend" and is the most popular pet in the United States, which has the largest population of dogs in the world.
- Dogs can smell nearly 1,000 times better than humans. Their olfactory (smell) glands are ultra sensitive, containing more than 220 million smelling cells while humans have only 5 million. The area of the dog's brain that interprets smell is also four times larger than that in a human's brain.

Cats:

- Kitty Cat is a tabby cat. A tabby is a cat with a distinctive coat that features stripes, dots, or swirling patterns, usually with an "M" mark on its forehead.
- A cat has more bones than a human. Humans have 206 while the cat has 230. A cat's collarbone does not connect with other bones. It is buried in the muscles of the shoulder region. This allows them to fit through any opening the size of their head.
- In Ancient Egypt, family members shaved their eyebrows when the family cat died as a sign of mourning. In Siam, the cat held such a place of high honor that she rode in a chariot at the head of a parade to celebrate an incoming king. It was the Pilgrims who first introduced the feline to North America.
- The black cat superstition originated in the United States but in Asia and England, black cats are considered lucky! Meow!

Activity: Draw a kooky cow, a daring dog, a mighty mouse or a cool cat. Give your character its own personality with a fun and funky pattern. Does it have stripes, polka dots, or checkers? What is its name? Around your drawing, list some fun and funky facts about your animal.

Social Studies – Farming Out Farm Work

Running a farm is a big job. What would you grow? How many people would you need to help you? How would you organize the job duties?

Activity: Create a Farm Work Chart

Divide into groups of 4. Each group makes a Farm Team. The team is responsible for the following: choose the crops, plant the crops, fertilize the crops, water the crops, weed the garden, and harvest the crops. Each team must have at least 4 different crops. Create a weekly chart that gives everyone a job and schedules all the duties accordingly.

Drama/Theater

Act out the story of *The Gigantic Sweet Potato* using Dianne de Las Casas' story theater script on her website. Create a puppet play using Dianne de Las Casas' puppet theater script on her website. <http://www.storyconnection.net> Click on "Book Activities" and "The Gigantic Sweet Potato."

Art

Love that Lily Mouse!

Draw your own version of Lily Mouse. How would she look? Make her a marvelous mouse with different colors. You can even create masks by attaching the puppets to a paper plate with a craft stick. Printable puppets and coloring sheets are available on Dianne's website <http://www.storyconnection.net> in the "Book Activities" and "The Gigantic Sweet Potato."

Make Funny Face Sweet Potato Pals

Using the Sweet Potato Pal template in Book Activities (go to <http://www.storyconnection.net> and click on "Book Activities" and "The Gigantic Sweet Potato"), design a Sweet Potato Pal. You can make it fun, funky, friendly, fascinating, or fancy!

Sweet Potato Prints

Cut a sweet potato in half. Use a pencil to draw a simple design, like a sweet potato leaf. Using a plastic knife (with adult supervision), carve or dig away around the design. Let the sweet potato dry for a couple of hours. Place a small pool of your favorite color paint on a foam plate. Using a brush, spread the paint evenly around the plate in a thin layer. Dip the sweet potato in the paint and stamp it onto a sheet of paper, a piece of canvas, a t-shirt, a canvas bag, or an apron. You can even make Ma Farmer's apron or Pa Farmer's t-shirt!

Craft

Cardboard Roll Mouse

Materials:

4-5" cardboard paper roll

construction paper
chenille sticks (white)
Googly eyes
glue
stapler
black marker

Directions:

To make the mouse, from construction paper, cut out a tail and two ears. Pinch one end of the tissue paper roll shut, inserting the tail in the middle. Staple it shut. Wrap the tail around a pen or pencil to create a curl. Pinch the opposite end of the tissue paper roll in the opposite direction (it will look like a triangle). Glue ears at the top and a Googly eye on each side. With a black marker, color the bottom tip, creating a nose. Cut two small white pieces of chenille stick and fold it in half, creating whiskers. Glue on each side of the nose. Your mouse is ready.

Sweet Potato Paper Bag Craft

Materials:

brown paper lunch bag
plastic grocery bags or newspaper
1 green chenille stick
1 sheet green construction paper
orange crayons or orange paint
green marker
hole punch
tape

Directions:

Color or paint every side of a brown paper lunch bag orange. Stuff the bag with plastic bags or newspaper. Cut 3-4 leaves from construction paper and hole punch the top of the leaf. Draw a green line down the middle. Thread leaves on the chenille stick, securing them with a piece of tape. Close the bag by wrapping the end of the chenille stick around the top of the bag. Crumple the bag slightly to give it a less uniform look so that it resembles the misshapen figure of a sweet potato.

