

PLANTING POTATOES

It takes quite a bit of garden space - and no small effort - to grow potatoes. But if you have sorted through soft, wrinkled potatoes in the market to find a few firm ones, you may be ready to try your hand at a potato patch. Potatoes will grow almost anywhere if they have fertile, well-drained soil and plenty of sunshine. In most areas two potato crops can be planted: early and late. The former is for summer harvest and use, the latter for fall harvest and storage for winter use.

HOW TO GROW POTATOES

Potatoes are grown from pieces of the tuber that contain the "eyes", the tiny depressions from which sprouts grow. These "seed" pieces, when planted, will produce leafy vines aboveground and clusters of potatoes below. Do not use store-bought potatoes for seed. Purchase certified disease-free seed potatoes as they are more reliable.

To prepare seed potatoes for planting, cut them into 2-ounce pieces, about the size of a large walnut. Each piece should contain at least one eye. Cure the seed pieces by spreading them out in a bright, airy place until they dry slightly and their cut surfaces harden. You may dust the pieces with the fungicide dust to prevent rot. Potatoes require acidic soil, tolerating soil with a pH as low as 5.2. Do not plant them in areas that have recently been limed.

An excellent way to prepare the soil for potatoes is to spread a 3 – 5" layer of well-rotted manure over the area to be planted; this will enrich the soil and improve drainage. A 5-10-5 fertilizer should be applied at the rate of 1 pound per 10 feet of row if you have not added manure (1/2 pound if you have). Mix the fertilizer thoroughly into the soil; direct contact with concentrations of fertilizer will injure the potato pieces.

As soon as the ground can be worked, plant the seed pieces in furrows 4" deep, 3" wide, and 3' apart. Set the pieces 12 inches apart, with eyes facing upward, and cover with 3 inches of soil.

About three weeks after the seeds are planted, sprouts will push up through the ground. As the vines grow, mound up over them with earth, leaves, straw or compost to keep the developing tubers covered. Potatoes that are exposed to sunlight turn green and develop a toxic substance called solanine.

It is not necessary to fertilize the plants again during the growing period but be sure that the soil around them remains loose and free of weeds. To do this, cultivate with a hoe shallowly because the tubers grow close to the surface.

You can start harvesting tubers at about the time the potato flowers bloom, seven to eight weeks after planting. Push aside the earth at the base of the plants and carefully pick off some of the small potatoes. These are the highly valued "new" potatoes, which you can boil and eat in their skins. Leave some potatoes to grow to full size.

When the plant foliage begins to wither and die down, the potatoes are full-grown. At this time, dig the tubers from the soil with a spading fork. Although you can leave potatoes in the ground for a time after the foliage has died, you should dig them up before the first heavy frost.

If you want to store potatoes, wash them and put them loosely in a ventilated, covered container to dry for a few hours. Never expose potatoes directly to sunlight. Store them in a dark, cool (30-40F) place.