

HOW TO GROW POTATOES

- Store seed potatoes in a cool (32-40° F), dark place unless you can plant them immediately. You can store them in a paper bag in the refrigerator. Make sure they do not dry out.
- In our area, people swear by planting potatoes on St. Patrick's Day or on Good Friday. A general rule is to plant them 4 to 8 weeks before the last frost date, when soil temperatures are 50° F or higher.
- Any seed potatoes that are about the size of a golf ball or an egg can be planted whole. Larger potatoes can be planted whole also, but that can require buying a lot of seed potatoes, so most people cut the larger ones into golf ball or egg sized pieces. Each piece should have 2 or more eyes. After cutting the pieces, let them dry overnight to minimize the chance of rot, or, if you want to plant immediately, you can put a little sulfur (2-3 tsp.) in a bag and shake them up in it. Do not dry the pieces in sunlight, you don't want them to shrivel.
- Prepare the bed. Potatoes (like most other plants) like good soil with good drainage and lots of organic matter. If your soil is less than perfect, dig in some compost.
- To avoid potato blight, never plant potatoes (or their cousins, tomatoes and eggplants) in the same area two years in a row. Rotate your crops. If your potatoes do get blight, you can reduce the spread and injury by foliar spraying with fermented compost tea.
- Plant the potatoes 2-3 inches deep, 12 inches apart, in rows 24-36 inches apart.
- When the plants are 6-8 inches tall, scrape the soil around the plant up into a hill around the plant, leaving about half the plant above the soil. Be very cautious not to injure the roots. 2 or 3 weeks later, hill the plants again, and again 2 or 3 weeks after that. Hilling keeps the roots cool, but provides light soil in which the tubers grow. You can put a layer of mulch on the hill each time to reduce water loss and make the potatoes easier to harvest, in fact, you can hill entirely with mulch if you prefer. On the 2nd and 3rd hilling, don't add too much soil, maybe an inch, but be sure developing tubers are covered, as if they are exposed to sunlight they will turn green and bitter.

- Potatoes take up a lot of room. There are ingenious methods for growing potatoes in smaller spaces - just Google 'potato planting in containers.' Also, we carry potato planting bags in the Edwards Greenhouse Garden Store.
- Potatoes need a consistent water supply. Do not let the soil dry out, but do not keep the soil soggy either. They need the most water in June and July when the plants are well leafed out. When the lower leaves start yellowing and the plant begins to die, later in the season, reduce the water to cure the potatoes, avoiding rotting and strengthening the skin for storage.
- Be careful with fertilizer, particularly nitrogen, as too much nitrogen will result in more leaves than potatoes. Compost is probably the most balanced fertilizer to use. If leaves turn yellow early in the season, indicating a lack of nitrogen, spray the foliage, in the morning when it's cool, with a fertilizer such as fish emulsion or compost tea. After the vines are in full bloom, fertilization is not necessary, and may be detrimental.
- 'New' potatoes may be ready 7-8 weeks after planting when the plants are blooming. You can gently poke around in the hill, taking care not to injure the roots or the plants, to see if there are any potatoes of a usable size. My grandpa called this "graveling for potatoes."
- Mature potatoes are harvested in the fall when the tubers have reached mature size. Waiting to harvest until after a heavy frost when the plant is dead and dry ensures better potatoes. After the plant has died, let the potatoes rest in the ground for 2 weeks to 'cure,' which toughens the skin, thus protecting the potato from bruising and scrapes. Do not wait till the soil freezes, as frozen potatoes are unusable. Dig the potatoes using a garden fork: gently lift the whole root system, brush off loose soil, bring them inside and let them dry. When they are dry, brush off the rest of the soil and store them in a cool (32-40°), humid, dark, airy place.
- Sources:
Potato Production in the Home Garden, University of Idaho Cooperative Extension Service (available online)
 Johnny's Selected Seeds, www.johnnyseeds.com