

Why Grow Potatoes?

There are many who would argue against the value of growing potatoes when they are reasonable priced in the supermarkets. However there is something magical about putting your spade in the ground, and digging up those beautiful potatoes covered in soil. It is without doubt a very satisfying moment.



Growing potatoes is an excellent vegetable for the beginner of all ages. Children especially love growing potatoes and can be brought into the whole learning process of seeing where our food comes from. Many would argue that if there is a shortage of space then the humble potato should be forsaken. However this need not be the case today as there are many suitable varieties that are perfect for "container growing" with very good resulting yields. Any salad variety would grow nicely in a container. There is room in everyone's garden or patio for a few containers. Specially made potato bags/sacks are available for this specific use.

There is no substitute for the wonderful taste and feeling gained when a serving bowl of freshly harvested potatoes is placed on the table. It is well worth the effort. So have a go and you'll be pleased with the results!



Potatoes, the Cleaning Crop

You will often hear the experienced allotment holder or gardener advise planting potatoes on new ground that hasn't been worked on with lots of weeds and say it will break up the soil. How? Well it's not actually the potatoes that break the soil up but it's the gardener and the process that does it.

Firstly, the area has to be weeded and cleared a couple of weeks before planting. Then any weed seedlings are removed as they appear over the next couple of weeks. Then the tubers are planted by opening up a trench, more digging. When the young shoots appear the soil is then earthed up, followed on by continually earthing up through the season. Therefore it is a continual process of moving the soil, hence improving its structure.

First Earlies, Second Earlies & Main Crop

The decision to purchase First Earlies, Second Earlies or Maincrop is often a confusing process if you have not planted potatoes before. Well it is not complicated it merely refers to the time it takes from planting to harvesting.

First Earlies are ready in about 10 weeks and are usually ready for harvesting from June to July. Second Earlies take about 16 to 17 weeks to mature and can be harvested from June to start of August. Maincrop take about 18 to 20 weeks after planting to mature and are harvested from July through to October. Maincrop tend to be the best to grow if you are looking for long term storage.

What is Chitting?

Simply put, this is merely encouraging the potatoes to sprout before planting. This way you are getting ahead. The aim being to produce dark green or purple shoots about 1 inch/ 2.5cm long. Long white shoots indicate too much heat and not enough light.



To chit seed potatoes, place in an egg box or seed tray with the end where most of the eyes are uppermost. Place in an area with lots of natural light.

How to Plant

Plant out when the soil has started to warm up, usually from mid-march onwards. Dig a trench between 3-5 in (7.5-13cm) deep.

- Plant First Earlies about 12in (30cm) apart with 16-20in (40-50cm) between the rows.
- Plant Second Earlies and Maincrop about 15in (38cm) apart with 30in (75cm) between the rows.

Handle your chitted potato with care being careful not to knock off the little eyes. Set your chitted potato in the trench with shoots pointing up. Cover the potatoes lightly with soil.

When the shoots appear, earth up each plant by covering with a ridge of soil so that the shoots are just covered. This is called **EARTHING UP**.



This is repeated throughout the growing season until the ridges are about 8 in/20cm high.

Caring For Your Potatoes

An application of a high potash fertilizer at the rate suggested on the pack will increase yields. Avoid fertilisers high in nitrogen as these will delay maturity of the crop.

Potatoes like plenty of moisture and light. In dry spells water regularly, especially around flowering time as this is when the tubers start to form. Lack of water will reduce the size of your potatoes.

Potatoes are also prone to blight which rots the tubers. To avoid this spray with Bordeaux Mixture from mid-June onwards at 2-3 week intervals.

Harvesting and Storing

Home grown potatoes can be lifted from June through to September depending on the variety and the growing conditions. First Earlies can be lifted and eaten as soon as they are ready. This is usually when growth above the ground is still green and as soon as the flowers are open.

Second and Maincrop varieties can be kept in the ground for much longer, until September even though the above ground growth may not be looking as good. Two weeks before the crop is to be lifted, cut the growth off at ground level. This will give the skins an opportunity to toughen up, making them less prone to damage when being dug up. Potatoes are best stored in hessian sacks available from the Garden Centre.

Growing Potatoes In Containers

If space is a problem, try growing your tubers in a container. It should be at least 1 foot/30cm deep and wide! Half fill the container with multi-purpose compost or good quality soil.

Commercially made potato bags can be bought at the garden centre to grow your potatoes in if you do not have a suitable container.



Place two or three seed potatoes, depending on size of container on top of the compost and cover with soil. As the shoots appear, cover further with compost. Continue with this covering the shoots until the top of the container is reached. Keep container well watered. Harvest after flowers have opened by tipping container on its side and removing potatoes. The potatoes can be used straight away.



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