



Gardeners Helping Gardeners Succeed

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Planting Guide: Potatoes

Potatoes are one of the first food crops you can plant in spring. Like peas, spinach, and onion sets, they are planted as soon as the ground is dry enough to dig. If your garden is slow to thaw, don't worry. As long as you get the crop planted four weeks before your last frost, it should do well.

Each potato tuber is a complete package, containing enough water and nutrients to get the plant off to a good start. It just needs well-drained soil and full sun. In temperate climates, irrigation isn't an issue; for many farmers and gardeners, potatoes are dry-land crops. One to 2 inches of water per month between planting and harvest is enough to produce a crop.

To start your potato patch, buy 'certified' seed potatoes, which have been inspected to assure they are disease-free. Don't plant home-grown potatoes with the corky blemishes typical of scab (or with symptoms of other diseases), because this disease will pass on to the next generation. And don't plant potatoes purchased from food markets—they are not reliable for use as seed potatoes because they have been sprayed to retard sprouting.

Encourage Sprouting

Exposing them to light encourages them to form nubs of growing shoots from the eyes (each eye is a dormant bud). Plants treated by "chitting," as this process is called, root quickly and mature earlier than those without sprouts. Chitting is simple: just spread the potatoes in a sunny indoor place for two to three weeks before planting.

Cut and Dry

Cutting removes the dominance of the eyes grouped at one end of the potato and encourages all of them to sprout. About a week before planting time, cut each large seed potato into pieces weighing about three or four ounces with one to two eyes each. Spread the pieces out in a single layer for a few days. The dried flesh is less likely to rot than raw cut surfaces once planted out in the cold, wet soil typical of an early-spring garden.

Why not plant a whole potato? Because the many eyes on a large potato will grow into a multi-stemmed plant that bears many small potatoes. You may leave small (egg-size) potatoes whole.

Yields

As a rule of thumb, a pound of seed potatoes will produce 15 to 25 pounds of potatoes at harvest. If you plant pieces, figure that each start will produce 3 pounds of potatoes.

Rows or Hills

There are several basic planting techniques. In row gardens, plant tubers or pieces 4 inches deep and 18 inches apart in rows 2 feet apart. If you'd prefer to plant in hills, mound soil as you would for squash and plant three or four seed potatoes in each hill. You can also plant potatoes in compost piles or in soil-filled tires. Generally, the more space you give the plants to develop (up to 3 square feet per plant), the higher the yields will be at harvest. The soil should be well drained and reasonably fertile. Till well-rotted manure or compost into the ground before planting.

Harvesting

When plants flower, you can harvest a few new potatoes from around the edge of each plant. New potatoes aren't just small potatoes—they're immature spuds whose sugar hasn't yet converted to starch, as it has in fully developed tubers. That's why new potatoes are deliciously sweet and why they're best when used immediately after harvest.

After the tops of the plants die down, push a potato fork (a spading fork or pitchfork will do) into the soil around the perimeter of each plant. Rock it back and forth to break small roots connecting the potatoes, then leave the potato patch alone for a week to give the skins a chance to harden up—this way the spuds won't bruise when you dig them up and they'll keep longer.



Cut big seed potatoes into chunks for planting



When plants reach 4 to 6 inches tall, mound soil up around them