



Potato Growing Tips

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One potato, two potato, three potato, four: it's time to plant potatoes for a family of four. Did you know that a dozen well-tended plants can yield as much as sixty pounds of potatoes? Of course, it helps to have years of potato growing experience to make that claim. But if you've never grown potatoes before, a dozen plants are very manageable and unearthing 30 pounds of spuds will be equally exciting.

In the mountains of Peru, the potato homeland, farmers still grow over a thousand varieties of *Solanum tuberosum*. Several hundred are commercially available in the United States. The major difference is color. Some have white, gold, pink, red, blue, purple and candy stripe flesh. They also vary in size from marbles to three-pounders. Varieties behave similarly when planted, though some may take longer than others to reach maturity.

Prepare Soil and PLANT: Potato plants prefer cool moist weather. As long as the soil isn't too wet, get them into the ground before March 1 for a June harvest. Adding organic matter (composted greenwaste, composted manure, cover crops or leaves) is a good way to improve soil before growing potatoes. Prepare soil well by digging to a depth of 12-18 inches and working in organic matter. Potatoes like a well-drained sandy loam soil. Heavy, untilled soils will yield small, deformed potatoes. They will rot under prolonged cold, wet conditions. If your soil drains poorly or is heavy clay, then consider using raised beds or growing potatoes in containers.

FERTILIZE: Depending on the kind and amount of organic matter that is used, some fertilizer may be needed. Apply fertilizer twice, at planting and about 4-weeks later. About 3 pounds of 10-10-10 fertilizer per one hundred square feet is needed for the growing season. This is very little nitrogen fertilizer compared to most other vegetable crops. Excess nitrogen promotes leaf growth at the expense of tuber (potato) formation.

SEED: For best results buy "seed potatoes" that are certified disease free from garden centers or through online or mail-order catalogs. If you save your own seed potatoes, discard any that show signs of disease. Cut large tubers into chunks about 1½ inch in size with at least two eyes. Spread the chunks on newspapers in a warm well-ventilated place to callus for a few days before planting. Small potatoes the size of an egg can be planted whole. Potatoes from the produce shelf in the grocery store may have been treated with a sprout inhibitor. However, if they are sprouting in your kitchen drawer, then you can plant them outside in your garden.

GROWING: There are many ways to grow potatoes. Most gardeners prefer planting in trenches or furrows that are spaced about 3 feet apart, but they can also be grown in individual hills or mounds, whichever works best for your garden site.



Prepare a planting furrow 4 inches deep, place the tuber pieces about 1 foot apart, then cover and fill the furrows with soil to ground level. Seed pieces can be spaced as close as 6 inches and as far as 1½ feet apart; the closer spacing yields smaller potatoes. Leave the furrow this way for 4 to 6 weeks, and then hill the soil up around the growing shoots adding several more inches of soil so that the seed pieces are now buried 6 inches deep.

Protect the growing tubers (which botanically are modified stems) from the sunlight as they will turn green (from chlorophyll development) and develop compounds called glycoalkaloids, which are mildly toxic and give tubers a bitter taste. You can use straw or mulch to cover the hills to conserve moisture and cut down on weeds.

WATER: Irrigation is very important to these shallow rooted plants. Since most roots are in the upper 12-inches of soil, they need frequent, light watering one to two times a week. After the tubers have formed they need consistent moisture. If the soil dries out the plants will push a second growth, when water is applied, causing small knobby potatoes and multiples.

That said, potato plants should not be kept overly wet or they develop diseases and rot. The solution is to have soil that drains. Extreme wet and dry conditions can also cause "hollow heart" or cavities near the center of the potato.

HARVEST: Begin harvesting a few potatoes when the plant flowers or about 60 days after planting. Be careful not to injure growing tubers when you begin the treasure hunt of grappling for your first small potatoes. Stop watering when the plant turns yellow and begins to die back. Harvest can be spread out over several weeks.

Mature tubers store better than immature tubers and resist bruising better. Store potatoes in a cool, well-ventilated place. Only sound potatoes should be put into storage and it is important to exclude light to prevent greening. Use within six weeks for best flavor and texture.



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