



One Potato, Two Potato, Three Potato, Four

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The common potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) was my first, delightful vegetable-growing experiment. There is perhaps nothing easier! Technically a perennial, the potato is usually harvested by digging up the entire plant at the end of its season which makes it an annual. But then, I'm surprised when escaped babies left in the ground sprout anew, growing into next season's plants.

Annual or perennial, these vegetables are a very satisfying crop. Two pounds of seed potatoes can yield 50 pounds of eating potatoes. It is important to choose disease-resistant seed potatoes from your nursery rather than planting grocery potatoes, as the latter may be treated to prevent sprouting. Cut unpeeled seed potatoes into 1.5-inch cubes, each with at least two eyes (the little recessed spots) which develop the roots and baby potatoes, and set the cubes on a tray at room temperature for two days. The raw pieces heal over, meaning less chance of the cube rotting when planted.

Potatoes thrive in full sun with regular water, in deep, loose, rich soil, in all zones of the western United States. You may plant in mid-winter for an early spring harvest or (like me) on St. Patrick's Day, when you'll have lots of nursery varieties from which to choose. This is also my way to honor my farming grandfather, born in Mitchelstown, County Cork.

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Three ways to plant:

- Plant the cubes just ½ inch to two inches deep, four inches apart, water well, and cover with a two-inch layer of straw. A drawback to this method is that you must keep the cubes moist but not wet until the potato plant shows above the soil surface. The plus is that harvesting is easy because the potatoes form just below the surface on the shallow plant roots and digging is usually not necessary.
- Plant the cubes in a furrow four inches deep, four inches apart, and cover with two inches of soil. As the potato plant breaks through the covering soil, add more soil to cover the plant, known as “hilling up”. When the covering soil is four inches above ground level, add upright boards on either side of the furrow and keep piling soil on top. The more depth, the larger the harvest (more room to grow roots) and the easier it is to keep the soil moist.
- If your potato pieces are sprouting, try this: prepare a bed and cover with black plastic anchored on each side. Cut x-shaped slits 12 inches apart and plant a piece of sprouted potato four or five inches deep, sprouted end up. Keep moist. This method ensures an earlier harvest without the need of “hilling up”.

One caveat: it is necessary to keep your planted pieces and developing potatoes covered with enough straw (method #1), soil (method #2) or black plastic (method #3) to avoid sun exposure which turns the potato green, making both potato and roots toxic.

New (small) potatoes are harvested when the aboveground plant begins to bloom. Mature potatoes can be dug when the plant dies back. Growth to harvest is about three to four months, depending on the variety.

Also, remember to rotate what you plant every three to five years and don't grow potatoes where you have previously grown tomatoes or peppers. These three plants are from the same family and thus, they are sadly susceptible to the same in-ground diseases.

I think that potatoes are wonderful! I hope these suggestions will help you grow a successful and happy crop.

REFERENCES:

The New Sunset Western Garden Book, 2012, Time Home Entertainment, Inc.

Plant Propagation, ed. Alan Toogood, The American Horticultural Society, DK Publishing, Inc.

Join us for a free class, **SPRING AND SUMMER VEGETABLES**, taught by Master Gardener Zack Dowell, on January 25 from 9 to 12 noon, at the Bethel-Delfino Agriculture Building, 311 Fair Lane, Placerville. Zack will discuss garden plant selection, planting times, site selection, soil preparation, proper seed planting techniques, and pest management. Don't miss this popular class!

On Saturday, January 11, come out for the 2nd Saturday Open Garden Day at the Demonstration Garden and see what winter plants are showing off! Get your winter gardening questions answered by Master Gardener docents, and feel free to just look around on your own. 9am-noon, \$2 parking, Sherwood Demonstration Garden, 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville

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For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512), or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.