



GROWING POTATOES IN NAPA COUNTY

By Dean Donaldson, Farm Advisor

KINDS TO PLANT

White potatoes grow well in Napa County. Good varieties include: White Rose, Burbank, Kennebec, Idaho Russet, Red La Soda, Chieftain and Norgold Russet. Because Sweet Potatoes and Yams are sensitive to temperatures below 50° F, they are not well suited to local climates. ‘Yellow Banana’ fingerling potatoes have also done well.

REQUIREMENTS

Potatoes need very well drained soil conditions. They do not grow well in clay soils. Potatoes need full sun, but are a mild weather crop – sensitive to frost and very hot weather. Plan on growing a spring and a fall crop for maximum production. Potatoes require careful watering because they are shallow rooted and are sensitive to too wet or too dry soil conditions. Constant moisture is essential for proper tuber development.

SOIL PREPARATION AND PLANTING

Cultivate the seed bed well; making sure the soil is loose and well pulverized before planting. Potatoes require moderate amounts of fertilizer before planting. Apply 3 pounds of fertilizer labeled 10-10-5, or equivalent to 100 square feet of soil to be planted. Mix all fertilizer products into the soil prior to planting. Adding aged organic mulch or compost is also a good idea. Add mulch about 2 inches deep before your final seed bed preparation and mix well before planting. Potatoes are started from sections of tubers called ‘seed pieces’. Buy and plant ‘California Seed Potatoes’ (inspected and certified by the California Dept. of Food and Agriculture to be free of diseases and nematodes). Stored potatoes are probably treated with a sprout inhibitor or may have potato virus disease. Certified seed potatoes are regularly available at local nurseries. Three pounds of seed pieces are enough for planting a row 100 feet long. Plant spring potatoes in early March and fall potatoes in late July. Plant pieces 6 to 10 inches apart down the row, and make rows at least 3 feet apart. Plant pieces into a 3 inch deep furrow, cover to level, water and wait 4 to 6 weeks. Then cultivate weeds and bury the new growth with another 3 inches of fine soil mulch so pieces are buried 6 inches deep. Expect new tubers to form above seed pieces. Keep a covering of soil over developing tubers to avoid producing green skinned fruit.

CARE

Control weeds with cultivation until potato top growth completely covers the bed. Be sure developing tubers remain covered. Potato roots grow to about 2 feet deep. Water weekly to assure consistent moisture supply. If plants get dry, they will stop growing and tubers will appear knobby and with multiples. Alternate moderate wet/dry can cause cavities to form near the center of the tuber. Tubers rot when soil is too wet.

COMMON PROBLEMS

In our area, common problems include: aphids, leaf beetles, gophers, garden symptoms, and wireworms. A host of minor problems can also plague potatoes, mainly due to wet growing conditions. Crop rotation or soil solarization will effectively control most potato disease and major insect problems. CAUTION: Potato vines are toxic to animals, and people should avoid eating green colored potatoes.

HARVESTING

Potatoes take about 4 months of growing weather to produce a crop. Expect from 2 to 4 pounds of tubers from each vine. Vines will begin to yellow and dry when the crop is ready for digging. You can harvest tubers when they have firm, not flaky skin. You can leave them in dry soil in the fall if covered with mulch. After digging, potatoes should be stored in the dark under cool temperatures. Expect them to keep up to 12 weeks if stored between 40 and 50° F. Potatoes are a good source of Vitamin C. When freshly cooked, one medium potato will provide one-half of the adult recommendation for Vitamin C. Potatoes are also low in sodium and are fat-free (not counting added toppings).

TRICKS

Plant in light soil; use lots of organic amendments; consistent watering. Plant in a new area each year. Use certified seed pieces.

Additional Reading:

Home Vegetable Gardening, UC ANR Publication #21444, 1992.

Pests of the Garden and Small Farm, UC ANR Publication #3332, 1990.

Planting Guide for Napa County, UCCE Napa County, mimeo, 1982.

Integrated Pest Management for Potatoes in the Western United States, UC ANR Publication #3316, 1996.

To simplify information, trade names of products have been used. No endorsement of named products is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products which are not mentioned.