

Potatoes

Imagine a food that is low in fat, rich in vitamin C, a good source of iron, vitamins B3 and B6, potassium, phosphorus, magnesium, and dietary antioxidants. Believe it or not, this superfood is the humble spud. Growing your own couldn't be easier and it gives you access to varieties you won't find in your local grocery store.

SOIL PREP

For the best crop of potatoes you need deep, fertile, moisture retentive soil. You can easily improve soils by adding organic matter, such as well rotted manure, Sea Soil or compost. Before planting in the spring, supplement with a general fertilizer, such as blood meal or bone meal applied to the soil surface or spread along the sides of the row during sowing. Soil should be on the acidic side to prevent potato scab.

PROPAGATION AND SPROUTING

Potatoes are generally grown from small tubers known as "seed potatoes." These are grown in tightly controlled disease free conditions and are often sprouted prior to planting, particularly when growing early season cultivars. Sprouting tubers extends the growing period and leads to earlier tuber formation and higher yields. The process is easy to do and can be done at home.

- Place tubers on a tray in a single layer.
- Keep trays of tubers in a cool, frost free place with moderate light, such as an unheated room and avoid direct sunlight.
- Sprouts form within a few weeks and, after about six weeks, shoots should be 5cm long and dark coloured.
- Choose about four strong shoots and remove any of the weaker shoots.

PLANTING

Once sprouted seed tubers can be planted in a row or individual holes and earthed up as they grow. Plant early potatoes in early April, with later cultivars being planted mid April. In northerly districts and during adverse weather planting can be delayed to mid May without a significant loss in production.

- Dig a row or individual hole 7.5 to 15cm deep, be sure to read your package instructions for potato specific planting depths.
- Place your tubers in the hole and gently push the soil back covering the tubers ensuring with at least 2.5cm of soil.
- If planting in rows then early cultivars should be spaced 30cm apart with 60cm between rows.
- As the sprouts emerge from the soil add more soil to "hill them up."
- Over the next few weeks continue adding soil as the sprouts emerge and leaf-out until you have filled in the hole and have a nice mound with a happy potato plant growing out of it.

HARVESTING

Lift early-potatoes carefully with a garden fork as soon as the tubers are about the size of a chickens egg or more. Flowering often occurs at this time. Provided the crop is healthy, it is okay to leave the plants until early to mid autumn to bulk up. When your plants start to die back naturally then you know it's time to harvest. Carefully lift them with a garden fork and try to harvest as many as you can to prevent "volunteers" coming back next year (which can cause potato pests and disease to build up in the soil). Lift on a dry day and allow potatoes to dry on the surface of the soil for two or three hours, never wash your potatoes as it can ruin their storage capacity.

STORING

All potatoes should be gathered by mid October to avoid weather damage.

- Handle tubers gently, as they bruise easily.
- Once they have dried you can brush off any remaining soil.
- Store in burlap or paper sacks or in boxes in a frost proof shed. Avoid plastic materials, including plastic lined paper sacks, as it creates the perfect conditions for rot.
- Early potatoes have a short dormant period and will sprout earlier so keep for a shorter time than main crop cultivars. Best to eat them as soon as possible.