

Seed Potatoes

PREPARING THE SEED TO PLANT: All tubers the size of a hen's egg (1-3 ounces) may be planted whole. Cut up larger potatoes into pieces before planting, using a clean sharp knife. Each piece should weigh at least 2-4 ounces and must contain two or more strong eyes. Seeds may be allowed to "heal over" for a day prior to planting, but must not be allowed to dry out. Dust newly-cut pieces with fungicide. Organic growers use powdered sulfur, placing a teaspoonful or two in a large paper sack and tossing the cut potato pieces.

SOIL PREPARATION: The ideal potato soil is deep, light and loose, a well-drained but moisture-retentive loam. Before planting all soils should be deeply tilled and organic matter (25-50 lbs per 100 sq ft) incorporated. Organic gardeners may use alfalfa meal or chicken manure compost. Potatoes do best in slightly acid soil with a pH ranging from 5.5-6.5. On soils above 6.0 we recommend using a little gypsum to supply calcium while leaving the pH nearly unchanged. Supplement with fertilizer, if necessary, but use nitrogen sparingly since too much nitrogen grows lots of leafy vines but makes few tubers.

PLANTING: When planting allow 24-40 inches between rows to permit efficient cultivation and hilling. Whatever your row spacing, dig a shallow trench about 6-8 inches deep. Plant the seed pieces 10-14 inches apart in this trench. Using a rake cover the seed with 3-4 inches of soil - do not fill the trench completely.

HILLING: Hilling is crucial to creating a place for potatoes to develop a large size and abundantly. When the stems are about 8 inches high, gently hill the vines up with soil scraped from both sides of the row with a hoe. Leave about half of the vine exposed. Hilling puts the root system deeper where the soil is cooler while the just scraped-up soil creates a light fluffy medium for the tubers to develop into. All tubers will form between the seed piece and the surface of the soil. Another hilling will be needed in another 2-3 weeks and yet another as well, 2 weeks after the second. On subsequent hillings, add only an inch or two of soil to the hill, but make sure there is enough soil atop the forming potatoes that they don't push out of the hill and get exposed to light (or they'll turn green).

WATERING: Unirrigated potatoes are less watery and taste better. The skins are also tougher so the tubers store better. There is some evidence that potatoes grown this way have a higher protein content. However, if irrigation water is scarce or not available the potatoes must be given more "elbow room", so they can forage for their water without having to compete with other potato plants. Also, all weeds must be eliminated so they do not compete for soil moisture.

FERTILIZING: After emergence and until blooming ends, we highly recommend foliar spraying every two weeks with fish emulsion. Plants respond to a foliar spray with a burst of vine growth that results in a higher yield at the end. Spray in the morning while it's still cool and the dew lingers on the leaves. This way all the fertilizer is absorbed. The best time to make the first application is the day before you hill up the vines for the first time. Once the vines are in full bloom, they stop making much new vegetative growth and begin to form tubers. Additional fertilization at this stage is pointless.

AVOIDING PESTS & DISEASES: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure! Here are some tips to help you avoid the worst potato diseases and pests.

Soil is everything! Build and maintain a healthy, well-balanced soil and your plants will naturally resist disease and damage from predatory insects.

Scab. Avoid uncomposted animal manures, alkaline soil and waterlogging on potato ground to avoid scab. where scab has been a problem, try acidifying your soil pH by incorporating small amounts of elemental sulfur into the rows several weeks before planting.



Disease. Don't grow potatoes in the same ground more than once in three years. Other members of the nightshade family (tomatoes, peppers, eggplant) should not precede nor follow potatoes.

INSECTS: The most basic rule: to avoid insect problems have vigorously growing healthy vines. In the Pacific NW flea beetles can make so many pinholes in leaves that the overall yield suffers greatly. The health of the vines has a great deal to do with how much interest flea beetles have in a plant. So the best prevention is total soil fertility. Rotenone and/or Pyrethrin controls flea beetles. If you are having a flea beetle problem you should consider improving next year's soil.

HARVESTING: Normally, seven or eight weeks after planting, the earliest varieties are blossoming. This signifies that early potatoes may be ready, so gently poke into a potato hill by hand to see what you can find while making as little disturbance as possible. New potatoes are delectable fresh treats. Later varieties are usually grown for winter storage. The ideal time to harvest is when the vines are dead. If you can wait for the tops to die back naturally, your harvest will be a little bigger and your potatoes just a tad richer. Drier soil is definitely an advantage when harvesting; The tubers come up a lot cleaner with much less effort. After the tops are dead, rest the tubers in the ground, undisturbed for two weeks to "cure", while the skins toughen up, protecting the tubers from scuffing and bruising during harvest and storage. It is better to harvest in the cool morning hours. If hand digging, place your fork outside the hill at first and lift the hill from outside so as to avoid stabbing a potato. If the soil is wet, let them air-dry on the surface for a few hours before gathering them. Spread the potatoes out under cover and let them air-dry before storage. Discard any blemished, scabby or injured tubers. Do not put damaged tubers into a sack of good ones; they will rot and rot other potatoes with them.

