

Seed Potato

GENERAL INFORMATION:

Spanish explorers first introduced potatoes to Europe in the sixteenth century. The English, French, and Germans regarded the potato as a curiosity for more than a century. The Irish first realized its potential and became economically dependent on the crop by 1845. When the fungus blight struck, it devastated the crop causing widespread famine and emigration from Ireland. Potatoes became a fairly important crop in North America by 1850.

Potatoes are annuals and require a frost free growing season of 90-120 days. The ideal climate is a cool summer, especially at the end of the summer when potatoes reach their maturity. Plant early potatoes just before the last killing frost when soil can be worked, usually about 45 degrees F.

SOIL PREPARATION:

A rich, loose, slightly acidic soil is best for potatoes. Use plenty of organic matter and add 5-10-10 or a similar low nitrogen fertilizer, about 10 pounds per 100 feet of row. Recommended soil PH is 4.8 to 5.4. If the soil is not acidic enough, scab disease may be a problem.

HOW TO PLANT:

Potatoes are usually grown from seed potatoes, a small piece of potato with at least one growing eye, which will sprout into a new plant. It is important to buy certified, disease free seed potatoes.

Cut seed potatoes about 1 ½ inches square, making sure that each has at least one good eye. Cutting the potatoes one week before planting allows the cut surface to heal slightly. Some growers dip cut pieces into a diluted bleach solution or commercial fungicide to prevent rot. You may also buy small potatoes and plant them whole to avoid a rot risk.

Set the pieces, cut side down, eye up, about 4 inches deep, 12-14 inches apart in rows 3 feet apart. Sprouts usually appear after 2-3 weeks. When plants are 5-6 inches high, hill up the mulch and soil around the growing stems.

FERTILIZER & WATER:

To fertilize when planting, place seed pieces in the center of a 6 inch wide trench and work the fertilizer in at the edges with a cultivator. Do not let the fertilizer touch the seed pieces. Too much nitrogen may cause excessive leaf growth at the expense of the tuber. Do not over fertilize.

Potatoes need a steady moisture supply. Try to keep the soil moist to a 1 foot depth through the growing season. If the soil dries out after the tubers begin to form, growth stops. It starts again as the soil is moistened. This start and stop growth leaves you with a misshapen, knobby, split, or hollow tubers.

USES:

Potatoes are a versatile crop and can be prepared in a number of delicious ways. They are a good source of protein, minerals, and vitamin C. For the most food value, leave the skin on whenever possible. If potatoes are to be peeled, keep parings thin to maintain the most nutritional value. Whether you use them for frying, baking, chipping, boiling, or mashing, potatoes allow you to be creative in your cooking. Enjoy.