



POTATO CARE

PLANTING

Potatoes may be planted as soon as the ground can be worked in the early spring, but do keep soil temperatures in mind. Potato plants will not begin to grow until the soil temperature has reached 45°F or 7.2°C. Plant seed potatoes, either pieces of whole potato or a small whole potato, with 1-2 eyes per piece. The soil should be moist, but not water-logged. Potatoes can tolerate a light frost, but you should provide some frost protection for the plants if you know that a hard, late season freeze is coming. If you are cutting up potato pieces for planting, do so 1-2 days ahead of time. This will give them the chance to form a protective layer, both for moisture retention and rot resistance. Smaller potatoes may be planted whole – a good rule of thumb is to plant them whole if they are smaller in size than a golf ball. Spread and mix in composted manure in the bottom of the trench before planting. Plant seed potatoes one foot apart in a 4-inch deep trench, eye side up.

CARE

Potatoes thrive in well-drained, loose soil. Potatoes need consistent moisture, so water regularly when tubers start to form. We find that potatoes are best grown in rows. To begin with, dig a trench that is 6-8 inches deep. Plant each piece of potato (cut side down, with the eyes pointing up) every 12-15 inches, with the rows spaced 3 feet apart. If your space is limited or if you would like to grow only baby potatoes, you can decrease the spacing between plants. To begin with only fill the trench in with 4 inches of soil. You will need to hill potatoes every couple of weeks to protect your crop. Hilling should be done before the potato plants bloom, when the plant is about 6 inches tall. Hoe the dirt up around the base of the plant in order to cover the root as well as to support the plant. Bury them in loose soil. The idea is to keep the potato from getting sunburned, in which case they turn green and will taste bitter.

WATERING

Keep your potato vines well watered throughout the summer, especially during the period when the plants are flowering and immediately following the flowering stage. During this flowering period the plants are creating their tubers and a steady water supply is crucial to good crop outcome. Potatoes do well with 1-2 inches of water or rain per week. When the foliage turns yellow and begins to die back, discontinue watering. This will start curing the potatoes for harvest time.





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FERTILIZING

Sprinkle bone meal (or high phosphorus fertilizer) on the top of the soil around the plants each time you hill the potatoes to ensure proper nutrients. Never add a fertilizer high in nitrogen to your potato patch as it will produce large plants, but no potatoes will develop.

HARVEST/STORING

Dig potatoes on a dry day. Dig up gently, being careful not to puncture the tubers. The soil should not be compact, so digging should be easy. New potatoes will be ready for harvest after 10 weeks, when plants are in flower, usually in early July. You should harvest all of your potatoes once the vines die (usually by late August), or the potatoes may rot. Make sure you brush off any soil clinging to the potatoes, then store them in a cool, dry, dark place. The ideal temperature for storage is 35 to 40°F. Do not store potatoes with apples; their ethylene gas will cause potatoes to spoil. Whether you dig your own potatoes or buy them at a store, don't wash them until right before you use them. Washing potatoes shortens their storage life.

GROWING IN BARRELS

Potatoes are easy to grow in barrels for homeowners without a lot of garden space. Choose a large 2-3ft tall container with holes or one you can cut holes into. Cut or drill a series of large drainage holes in the bottom and bottom sides of your container. Fill the bottom of your container with about 6" of compost. Next add some seed potatoes on the layer of soil leaving plenty of space between them. Loosely backfill the potatoes with another 6" of compost and water just to dampen soil. Keep the soil damp at all times but be careful not to overwater. When they have about 6 to 8 inches of foliage, add another layer of your soil-compost mix covering about one-half to three-quarters of the visible stems and foliage. Repeat this process of allowing the sprouts to grow and then covering the sprouts and moistening the soil as the plants grow up toward the top of the barrel. After about 10 weeks or until the plants flower and start to yellow, the potatoes should be ready to harvest. Carefully dig down with your hands to inspect the top-most layer. After you've confirmed your suspicions, dump the barrel out on a tarp and inspect your bounty.

Information courtesy of: www.almanac.com and <http://www.seedsavers.org>