

## Potatoes



Versatile earthy little gems

**Family -Solanaceae-** it doesn't matter how many years you've been growing potatoes - digging up your first crop of the season is as exciting as it was the very first time you did it! Every one you pull out of the ground gives you joy, and the momentum to keep digging and unearthing your treasures gets bigger and bigger. Potatoes are **easy** to grow and the reward of your effort is knowing that you have nurtured something that is so versatile that will store for a long time, given the right conditions. There are over 5000 varieties worldwide. In the **UK** they are categorised as:

**first early** - ready for harvesting **100** days after planting

**second early** - ready for harvesting **115** days after planting

**maincrop** - ready for harvesting **130** days after planting

In the **culinary** world they fall into the category of either being floury or waxy and some fall into an undefined category of somewhere between the two. Growing a few varieties is useful as you can expand your use of them in the kitchen e.g. to boil, roast, mash, use in salads, etc.

**Starting seeds** - you've undoubtedly seen the eye watering choices of 'seed' potatoes that appear in garden centres in February and March. The term refers to a potato **tuber** that is grown **specifically** for planting so that it produces a new plant. The **new plant** will ultimately produce more potatoes. The potato plant stores its energy in the tuber so that it can regrow the following year. In spring, potato tubers will start to sprout **new growth** from **growing points** called **eyes**. Each potato has several eyes.

**Tip-** Although the potatoes in your fridge will start to sprout if you keep them too long, it's better not to plant them in the garden because they could be contaminated with blight spores and viral diseases. It's also not advised to let leftover potatoes (volunteers) to sprout

in your vegetable garden for the same reason. The new seed potatoes you purchase every year are **guaranteed** to be free from viruses.

**When you** bring your new seed potatoes home, they need to be allowed to form new shoots from the eyes. This is a process called '**chitting**' and the shoots are referred to as '**chits**'. Doing this gives your plant a head start, once planted in the ground.



Prior to planting, place your seed potato in a sunny but cool position so it can produce the chits over a couple of weeks. Saving an old egg box to sit your tubers in and placing it on a sunny window sill is ideal. Make sure the 'eyes' are on the top so the sprouts can grow. After several weeks, once the chits have grown, you may find the tubers look shrivelled. This is okay. They can still be planted.

**Planting out**- once your potato tubers have grown shoots that are about an inch long, and providing that the long-term weather forecast is favourable, you can plant them in the ground / containers in March or April. They like a sunny, well drained site in ground that has had manure dug into it during the winter. They prefer slightly acidic soil (which is why they grow so well in compost heaps), but it's not imperative. You can plant either in holes or trenches at least **6 inches deep**. Plant each potato **15 inches apart** and plant rows of potatoes with an **18 -inch gap** between them.



Getting the spacing right is important because throughout the growing season you are going to do something called 'earthing up', and for that, you need plenty of room.



Potatoes grow like this:

As the tall stem (haulm) of the plant grows, you need to keep building up the soil around the base of the plant. This seems counter intuitive but the plant develops the potatoes under the soil. The more the haulm is buried the more it will grow. The more the haulm grows the greater the opportunity it has to develop potatoes. This process is known as 'earthing up' and is a way to maximise your yield.



Pull the soil up around the base of the plant allowing for a little bit of greenery to remain peeping through the soil. Continue to do this throughout the growing season. Every time the haulm grows, earth it up. It might end up looking a bit like you've buried a body!



This is how your earthed-up plants will look as the season progresses.

Containers-potatoes are ideal for growing in deep containers. You can be adventurous and use anything you like: from an old garden incinerator to a compost bag. As long as it is sturdy and deep.



From tyres to custom made potato sacks/ potato buckets, they really will grow anywhere!

When growing in containers, make sure your potatoes are approx **12 inches** apart. In a standard large garden pot / potato sack this equates to **3 tubers** per pot. Half fill the pot with multi-purpose compost and sit your potatoes on top, making sure the sprouts are facing upwards. Your plant is going to grow **up** it's container. Cover the tuber with enough soil so that it has a **6 inch** layer on top. The sprouts will start to grow through the soil. As they do, **earth them up** as described above.



Once the shoots have reached the top of the container there is clearly no way to continue the process, so the plant can now be left to concentrate on making your lovely spuds.

**Tip - earthing-up** can be achieved with materials other than compost/soil. The aim is to keep the spuds under cover because when they are exposed to light, they become green and inedible (seriously - don't eat green potatoes!). You can use **straw, shredded newspaper and grass clippings** that will all rot down and feed the plant. **Grass clippings** are ideal. Potatoes need nitrogen to grow their haulms and this is found in the grass clippings. The more clippings you add, the larger the haulms should become which maximises your yield even more.

**Raised beds** potatoes are ideal for growing in raised beds in the manner described above.



When growing your tatties in raised beds, it's possibly easier to start by making planting holes rather than digging a trench but it really is up to you.

**Plant care-** keep 'earthing-up' and ensure that any potatoes that might start to peep through the soil are quickly covered to reduce their exposure to light.

**Companion planting** - although they are members of the same family, potatoes should **NOT** be planted with **tomatoes**. They don't like to be near cucumbers, peas, strawberries, turnip or spinach. They get on well with members of the brassica family such as cabbages, cauliflowers and Brussel sprouts and also with beans and lettuce.

**Watering and Feeding-** ensure you keep your spuds well and evenly watered. It takes a lot of energy to grow these marvels. Give them a **nitrogen** rich feed while they are growing the

haulms. Afterwards, feed them something rich in **potassium** to help the development of the tubers. When growing in pots, take careful note of watering. When it rains it's easy to assume your pots will be well watered. These fellas are growing near the base of your pot and you need to ensure that water is reaching so far down. You may have a poor yield if not adequately watered.

**Harvesting** - First early varieties are less likely to be damaged by pests. If planted in March they should be ready to harvest in June. Harvest second earlies from the end of June to the start of August. Maincrop potatoes are probably the most recognisable varieties and they store well. Harvest maincrop potatoes from August. After the foliage has died back, you can harvest them but leave them on the surface of the soil for a couple of days for the sun to dry the skin, this helps them last longer in storage.

**Tip** - Some potatoes (i.e. 'Charlotte') can be grown as late season potatoes. Plant in July or early August for a mid-winter crop. Salad potatoes are waxier than maincrop, perfect for containers, plant in January, grow in rich, free-draining compost, make sure they have plenty of water.

**Problems**- yes, there are a few don't but let that put you off. The reward far outweighs the effort:



Ah, slugs are at it again!



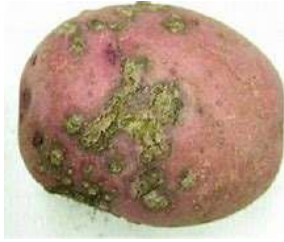
They'll eat both

the haulm and the tuber! Watering in the morning, setting beer traps and introducing nematodes are all measures that can help combat them.



**Potato blight** is a fungal disease that first manifests as black spots on the leaves. In severe cases it can infect the underground tubers. It can quickly devastate a crop. It thrives in humid conditions. As soon as you spot it, cut away infected leaves before they have a chance to contaminate healthy ones. It will reduce the amount of tubers that grow but you might be able to save the crop. Do not compost the infected leaves. Good spacing

that facilitates good air flow around the plants will help lessen the chances of blight developing.



**Potato scab** is a soil-borne bacterium. It causes scabby spots to appear on the tubers. Slightly acidic soil (4.8 - 5.2) helps reduce the risk of this disease. Resistant varieties are also available. Scab is usually just a cosmetic problem and tubers can still be harvested.

varieties - here are some of the most commonly grown in UK and some just for fun!

(First) Red Duke of York



Accent



Divaa



(second) Charlotte



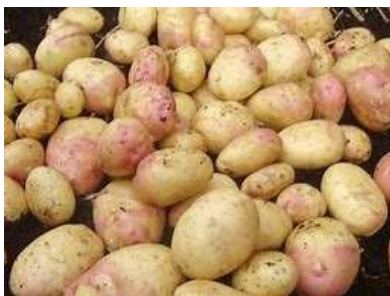
Kestrel



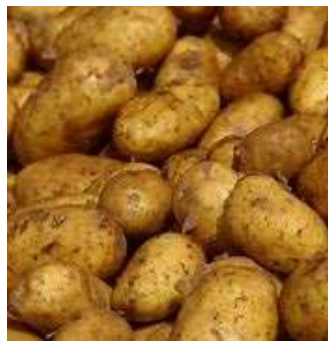
Harlequin



(Main) King Edward



Maris Piper



Desiree



King's Garden  
cultivating connections  
to the natural world

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