

Growing Potatoes

by Royer Held

Potatoes are easy and fun to grow. They will do well in any good garden soil that is in full sun for most of the day. They do not need special treatment and will not produce a good crop if given too much nitrogen. This causes the plants to grow well, but the plants forget to set tubers.

Plan to plant potatoes sometime between the first and third weeks of May. Frost may damage growth that emerges above ground, but by then there is a lot of growth below and new shoots will replace any that are damaged by frost.

Prepare seed potatoes by cutting large potatoes into smaller pieces. Each piece should have at least one eye, the sunken spot on a potato from which sprouts emerge. Cut pieces should be allowed to dry for at least a day so that the cut heals over before it is planted.

Each cut piece should be at least the size of an inch cube. Leave the skin on and try to cut the potatoes so that the cut area is not that large. This will allow the piece to heal over. Smaller potatoes that are about an inch in diameter may be planted whole.

Prepare a bed for your potatoes as you would any garden bed. You may wish to plan to hill up your potatoes during the growing season. Hilling simply involves mounding earth around the base of the potatoes as they grow so that the stems get covered and produce more shoots to produce potatoes. You can mound with garden soil or compost.

You may want to create a depression in the bed in which to plant the potatoes. This will make it easy to mound them later in the season by simply filling in the trench.

Plant potatoes two inches deep and a good foot apart. You can space potatoes across a bed as long as they are no closer than a foot from their nearest neighbor.

Potatoes like even soil moisture – they don't like it soggy, but they prefer not to dry out completely either. Mulch will help maintain soil temperature and will also keep weeds from becoming a problem. You can lightly mulch your potato bed right after you plant the potatoes. Cover the bed with no more than a inch layer of mulch. Once the plants emerge through the mulch you can begin to add more until you have a layer as much as 4 to 6" thick. This will keep weeds down and encourage tuber formation.

Potatoes are really good at breaking down compostable material. Many people grow potatoes in their compost piles. Mulching with compost is also effective.

Your potatoes will be ready to harvest when the plants turn brown. When this happens depends on the potato variety. Take care not to wound your potatoes when you dig them.

Wounds reduce the storage life of the tuber. Spread the potatoes in a cool dry place for a week so that they can cure.