



Potatoes – Little Effort, Big Reward

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Potatoes are one of the easiest vegetables to grow, yet many home gardeners do not try them. There are many ways to plant potatoes, but I will share the method that works well for me. Any “average” home grown crop will taste far superior to the best commercially grown counterpart due to the freshness. One of the biggest advantages of growing potatoes is that you plant and harvest them at a time when not much else is going on in the garden.



Start in the spring when the ground can first be worked. I suggest starting small your first year, maybe five or ten pounds. Some people cut the potatoes into small pieces, but I find that just invites pathogens. I prefer to leave my potatoes whole, and opt for small ones. Commercial growers have to bury their potatoes, but that is too much work for me! I do till up the ground, but it is just to turn under what was growing on the surface. Place the potatoes on the surface about a foot apart, in rows about a foot and a half apart, and cover with a generous layer of well-rotted compost. You can purchase this, but I suggest making your own from leaves, lawn clippings, and kitchen scraps.

Apply the compost to sufficiently bury the potatoes, then put on some fertilizer intended to grow bulbs. This will have the proper ratio for our potatoes. Any fertilizer will do, but I prefer the

organic kind. Consider a soil test before fertilizing but without one, follow the directions on the package. Top off the bed with another layer of mulch. Use what you have on hand. You may even use partially composted leaves for this top layer. The goal here is weed suppression. Once the potatoes start growing, they will shade the area sufficiently and weeds are seldom a problem.

Keep the potatoes well watered, but do not leave the soil soggy. The good part about my planting method is they are technically above the ground so it usually drains well. Watch out for pests like Colorado potato beetles, which are yellow-orange with black stripes. Their larvae are red-orange with black dots down the side. I search for them every day and simply squish them with my fingers. Their eggs are small and orange, so I scrape them off as well. That is the only form of pest control I do, and am successful. The key is to not let them get out of control. Plus, who does not like a casual stroll through the garden in the summer anyway?

Do not let the tubers become exposed to sunlight as they will turn green, which is toxic. Simply pile up more mulch to keep the tubers covered as the potatoes grow. You may add some more fertilizer at this time, or if you are using compost that may be enough. In mid-summer, after the plants have flowered, the tops fall over and begin to die off. Once the tops have completely dried up, you can harvest. Due to time constraints I actually leave mine in the ground until the fall, and harvest after the first light frost. This preserves the potatoes through the rest of the summer, but you do risk damage by rodents. For me, this has only been a problem if I leave them in the ground right up until it freezes.



To harvest, get a pitchfork and turn over the soil. I store my potatoes in burlap sacks (available at most feed stores) in an unheated basement or attached garage. You want the temperature right above freezing. My favorite for long term winter storage is Kennebec, which is also highly productive in the garden. Yukon Gold seems to win the taste tests with their buttery flavor, but they are intermediate in storage. My third variety is Red Norland grown for their distinct taste, but they are not very productive and do not store well.

One last piece of advice is to rotate crops. Do not plant potatoes in the same spot each year, or where tomatoes, peppers, or squash were as they can get many of the same diseases. Some people like to plant potatoes in buckets with holes or above ground bags with two to four potatoes put in each. Either way, find a method that works for you but by all means, plant potatoes!



For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.