

Potatoes are a crop that can be planted fairly early. Many gardeners in our area like to have their potatoes planted before the end of May. While this is not a 'must'; potatoes do require our full growing season to reach their optimum size and maturity. Planting later, or harvesting early will result in smaller potatoes. Some gardeners will do this on purpose in order to harvest smaller 'new' potatoes.

There are two schools of thought regarding planting depth. Plant shallow (1-2 inches, 2 ½ - 5 cm) or deeper (3 even 4 inches, 7-10 cm). The potato plant will emerge from the soil quicker if planted shallow, however, more and higher hilling will be required. Do ensure that the soil temperature *at planting depth* is at least 6°C, and that it can be expected to stay at least that warm.

Large seed potatoes can be cut into several smaller pieces. The only requirement is that each piece has at least one nice viable 'eye'. If hand planting, ensuring that the 'eye' is placed facing up will encourage quicker emergence of the potato plant. While proper "seed" potatoes are preferred, you can plant old table potatoes that you have at home, that have begun to grow 'eyes'; and still expect to harvest potatoes in the Fall. Commercially sold table potatoes have either been treated or stored in such a way as to hinder the growth of 'eyes', and therefore are not preferred for planting. Potato fertilizer is usually high in phosphorus (example: 8-32-16). A small amount of granular fertilizer dropped in the 'hole' under the seed potato is typical.

Potatoes tend to do best in slightly more acidic soils. If your soil is very sandy, you may choose to add organic matter (compost), manure, black top soil, and/or peat. If using manure, always ensure it is well aged. Adding sulphur can help as well, especially if your soil is neutral or alkaline.

Potatoes are a crop that does need to be hilled. The potatoes *must* grow underground. Exposure to light will cause your potato to turn green, making it inedible. Ensuring that your potato patch is weeded will yield a more bountiful harvest. Typically, weeding and hilling chores go hand-in-hand.

Your potato plant will bloom. (Potato plant blooms are quite pretty). Some plants will also produce small green 'fruits' that resemble tiny green tomatoes. Through experimentation, we have found that removing these, or leaving them on the plant seems to have no noticeable effect on the potato harvest.

The potatoes are mature and ready to dig when the above-ground plant begins to turn brown and dies back. Most small growers use a full-size garden fork to dig the potatoes. Take care to insert the fork well off to the side of the plant (beside the 'hill' - to prevent spearing your potatoes) and as deeply as possible before prying the potatoes and plant out of the ground.

If you are only growing a few plants, they can be grown in large tubs or "grow bags" that are commercially available. Fill them only 2/3 full with dirt when planting, then instead of hilling, simply add another layer of soil as required. In this case, you can harvest your crop simply by dumping out the whole container, and picking out your potatoes. (no digging)

Sweet potatoes also grow underground, but, are generally grown from vine cuttings. These really love very warm soil (21-26°C) to grow in, making them ideal for container growing. This also makes it easier to bring the containers into a sheltered area early in the Spring and later in the Fall (even late summer if the weather is cool). The sweet potatoes can take 3-4 months to mature from slips, and want to be in warm soil the whole time. Mulching your young transplant or planting in a hole made in a piece of plastic placed over the soil surface will help keep the soil warmer, especially in the Spring. Sweet potatoes are not as hardy a plant as regular potatoes, and the vines need to always be protected from frosts.

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