

Perfect Potatoes



Potato, Práta, *Solanum tuberosum*

Potatoes....yummy yummy....how would we survive without them? Did you know that a potato is actually a tuber rather than a vegetable? A tuber is the short thick stem of a plant that grows below the ground and stores food for the plant. Potatoes are one of the world's most important food crops. They are full of nutrients, taste great and are fairly easy to grow. They were first domesticated 8,000 years ago in the Andes in South America and were introduced to Europe in the mid-16th century by the Spanish. The biggest threat of disease to potatoes is blight or to give it its botanical name *Phytophthora infestans*, which means 'plant destroyer'! Unfortunately it thrives in Ireland's humid summer weather and this oomycete (water mould) caused the 'Gorta Mór' or the Famine here in the mid-19th century. Before the Famine, a labourer would eat 4 - 6kgs of potatoes a day, now we only eat about 0.2kgs on average a day!



Queen Marie Antoinette of France was said to have decorated her hair with potato blossoms!

Which potatoes would you like to grow?

Potatoes are grouped together depending on how long they take to mature before you can harvest them. First earlies take 90 days, second earlies take 110 days and maincrop take 135 days. The first earlies and second earlies produce a smaller yield of crop and the potatoes are smaller but because they are harvested earlier than maincrops, they may avoid the blight season.

	When to plant	When to harvest	Variety of potato
First earlies	Mid-Late March	June - July	Homeguard; Sharpe's Express;
Second earlies	Early April	July - August	British Queens; Nicola
Main crop	Mid-Late April	August - October	Maris Piper, Sarpo Mira

Potatoes were the first vegetables grown in space, on the Columbia space shuttle in 1995!

How to grow potatoes in containers.....

You will need

- Seed potatoes
- Large pot (each potato will need 10ltrs of space)
- Growing medium; homemade garden compost or well-rotted manure mixed with soil or multipurpose compost.



You don't have to but you can 'chit' or sprout your potatoes before planting them. This gives them a head start and provides you with a better crop. Place the potato tubers in a container such as an egg box with the 'eyes' facing upwards. Keep them in a dry, cool and light area. The tubers should produce short stubby dark green/purple sprouts.

Take a large pot, make sure there are enough drainage holes in the bottom. You can cover the base of the pot with some stones as well to improve the drainage. Cover the stones with a 10cm layer of well mixed growing medium. Spacing is very important when growing potatoes in containers. Each potato needs 10 ltrs so in a 30 ltr pot grow 3 potatoes, in a 40 ltr pot grow 4 potatoes etc.



Make sure potatoes are evenly spaced out and place the chitted or sprouted eyes facing upwards. Cover the potatoes with 10cm of growing medium. As the potatoes grow and produce leaves, add additional layers of growing medium to cover the leaves. This will also protect them from frost (make sure the leaves are covered if frost is due). Stop layering about 5cm below the rim of the pot. Earthing up the potatoes will increase your harvest. Place the containers in full sunlight and spaced apart.

It is important to keep container potatoes well-watered but not sodden, you can add liquid fertilizer (seaweed extract) a couple of times during the growing season. You can harvest new potatoes before they flower or wait until they have flowered and turned yellow. Only the tubers are edible, **DO NOT** eat the flowers, fruit, leaves or stems as they are poisonous. When ready empty out the contents of the container and pick **YOUR** potatoes!



Good luck everyone and enjoy!!!!