

How to Grow Potatoes

Planting

Optimum soil temperature for good growth ranges from 55 deg. F. to 70 deg. F. A small planting of the earliest early potatoes may be attempted by planting 6-8 weeks before the last frost date. Seed potatoes can rot without sprouting in cold, waterlogged soil, so planting extremely early can be risky. If a late frost burns the vines back to ground level the tubers will make more sprouts, but each time this setback happens the final yield gets later and smaller. Your main crop should be sown so that there is virtually no risk of frost blackening the emerging vines. The width between rows and overall plant spacing is determined by the size of your garden, your method of cultivation and the amount of irrigation you have available (or wish to use). Farmers and market gardeners need 36-42 inches between rows to permit efficient cultivation and hilling. Gardeners can get by with as little as 2 feet between rows. Where water is short or irrigation will not be used and soil is open and loose so plants can take advantage of more rooting space, row spacing can be increased to as much as 5 feet and the individual seed pieces separated as much as 18 inches apart, giving the plants a large area in which to forage for moisture. Of course, with wide spacing like this combined with the effects of moisture stress, yields will be lower. Whatever your row spacing, dig a shallow trench about 6-8 inches deep. Plant the seed pieces 10-14 inches apart in this trench. Using a rake, cover the seed with 3-4 inches of soil-do not fill the trench completely.

Hilling

Hilling is crucial to creating space for potatoes to develop to a large size and abundantly. Sprouts will emerge in about two weeks, depending on the soil temperature. When the stems are about 8 inches high, gently hill the vines up with soil scraped from both sides of the row with a hoe. Doing this simultaneously weeds the row. Leave about half of the vine exposed. Hilling puts the root system deeper where the soil is cooler while the just scraped-up soil creates a light fluffy medium for the tubers to develop into. All tubers will form between the seed piece and the surface of the soil. Another hilling will be needed in another 2-3 weeks and yet another as well, 2 weeks after the second. On subsequent hilling, add only an inch or two of soil to the hill, but make sure there is enough soil atop the forming potatoes that they don't push out of the hill and get exposed to light (or they'll turn green). But if you hill up too much soil, you'll cover too many leaves and reduce your final yield.

Harvesting

Normally, seven or eight weeks after planting, the earliest varieties are blossoming. This signifies that early potatoes may be ready, so gently poke into a potato hill by hand to see what you can find while making as little disturbance as possible. You may either "rob" a few plants of a potato, or simply harvest an entire plant from the end of the row. "Rob" gently to avoid injuring growing roots and stressing the plant. Later varieties are usually grown for winter storage. The ideal time to harvest is when the vines are dead. It is best to wait until heavy frosts kill the tops off or, if your tubers are fully-sized up but no frost is in sight, you can mow the tops or cut them off by hand with a sickle. But if you can wait for the tops to die back naturally, your harvest will be a little bigger and your potatoes just a tad richer. Dryish soil is definitely an advantage when harvesting; the tubers come up a lot cleaner and with much less effort. After the tops are dead, rest the tubers in the ground, undisturbed for two weeks to "cure," while the skins toughen up, protecting the tubers from scuffing and bruising during harvest and storage. Minor injuries in the skin may heal if allowed to dry. It is better to harvest in the cool morning hours. You want to chill your tubers down for better storage, as fast as reasonably possible and if they start out cool it will be much easier. If hand digging, place your fork outside the hill at first and lift the hill from outside so as to avoid stabbing a potato. If the soil is wet, let them air dry on the surface for a few hours before gathering them. If the weather is unsettled and you still must harvest, spread the potatoes out under cover and let them air-dry before storing. The "field-grade" your harvest. Separate out and discard (or set aside to eat immediately) and blemished, scabby, misshapen, or injured tubers. Do not put cut or damaged tubers (those injured during harvest) into a sack of good ones; they will rot and rot other potatoes with them.