Growing potatoes: America’s favorite vegetable

Irish potatoes are one of the most popular vegetables grown in Northwest Florida during the winter. Irish potatoes, not to be confused with the sweet potato which is a summer vegetable, are relatively easy to grow. And there is nothing better than harvesting those young, small new potatoes that go so good with snap beans and other vegetables.

**Site Selection**

Crop rotation is a must with potatoes. Do not plant potatoes in the same area of the garden each year; it may predispose the crop to disease and insect problems. Tomatoes, potatoes, peppers and eggplant are in the same family and tend to get the same disease and insect problems. Rotate with a crop such as beans, squash or corn. Such a rotation will help control diseases, insects and weeds. Potato yield and quality will be improved with rotation.

**Preparing the soil**

The potato is adapted to a wide variety of soils. It performs best, however, on a well-drained sandy loam amended with organic matter.

Prepare the soil as you would for planting most other vegetables, but avoid excessive applications of lime where potatoes are to be grown. A high soil pH increases the incidence of scab disease on the tubers.

If your space is limited, think about growing potatoes in containers. Potatoes can be grown in everything from well-drained pots to old tires.

**Seed Potatoes**

Buy certified seed potatoes from your local garden supplier or nursery. Don’t use grocery store potatoes. Potatoes can be cut so that each seed piece has at least two eyes. Each piece should be about the size of a small egg. Make cuts to expose the least amount
of cut surface. During cutting, discard any potatoes that show dark rings or discoloration inside.

Cut seed pieces should “heal-over” before planting. To heal a cut tuber, leave the tuber in a cool (60-65°F), dark, well-ventilated, humid place for one or two days. Seed pieces can be planted directly after cutting but the risk of rot before sprouting is increased.

Planting
Irish potatoes can be planted from January through March along the Gulf Coast or when the soil temperature is above 45ºF. Plant the seed potatoes about 3 to 4 inches deep and 8 to 12 inches apart. Be patient while waiting for the emergence of shoots following planting. It usually takes about 3 to 4 weeks for new potato sprouts to appear. Following emergence, growth is rapid.

If a cold snap should kill off new growth, be patient. If your seed potato had more than one eye, it is likely to resprout.

Maintenance
A side dressing of fertilizer will be needed when the plants are about six to eight weeks old. If a basic application of a balanced fertilizer was used at planting, use a product containing only nitrogen and potassium for sidedressing.

Sidedress by sprinkling the fertilizer on the soil surface just beyond the outside leaves. Only a small amount is required. Be careful not to overfertilize, especially with nitrogen. Excessive nitrogen will cause plants to produce too much foliage and delay tuber growth. The best method to determine how much fertilizer to apply is to test the soil.

Potatoes require good soil moisture at all stages of growth. An uneven water supply can influence the development of knobs or growth cracks on tubers.

A number of weed, insect and disease pests can affect potatoes in a home garden. Examine potato plants regularly to detect pest outbreaks before they become major problems. If problems do develop, contact your local Extension Office for their advice.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.
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