

Wallsend Nurseries

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Growing Potatoes

Potatoes are one of the most popular, and certainly one of the most easily grown, of all the vegetables produced in the home garden. They are a rewarding and high producing crop for beginners or experienced gardeners alike and take very little time or maintenance.

Potatoes are not grown from seed like most other vegetables but from the smaller tubers left over from a previous crop. These are called “seed potatoes” and have small “eyes” embedded in the skin surface from which the new potato plants will grow.

It's usually best to buy seed potatoes from a nursery or produce store as they will be certified free of virus. These have been dug from crops free from virus and other diseases and are available February and July usually. This is the main planting season.

Many varieties are available for the home gardener but in Newcastle, undoubtedly, the best variety is “Sebago”. This is a great all round potato for mashing, boiling, chip making and baking with a firm white flesh and excellent flavour.

Choose a position in full sun as potatoes grow weak and produce few tubers if there is not enough light. To ensure the best crop be careful to remove weeds as they grow so as not to disturb the potatoes or expose the developing tubers to light by removing soil from above them.

Soil for successful potato growing needs to be very well drained or root rot will occur. A soil manured for a previous crop will be ideal as most of the excess nitrogen should have been used up. High nitrogen availability leads to plenty of top growth and poor tuber production. The addition of some super phosphate will be an advantage also.

Dig trenches approximately 200mm in depth into the prepared soil and place the seed tubers about 300mm apart along it. Seed potatoes can be cut into several pieces to extend the number of plants for a larger crop. All you need to do is ensure that each piece has an eye located on it so it can produce a new plant. Cover lightly with soil so as not to fill in the trench. This will be done as the plants grow and is called “hilling”. Hilling ensures that the developing tubers are always covered by soil as they will turn green and become poisonous to eat if light reaches them. Simply push in the sides of the trenches as the plants grow to cover the developing tubers. This will also help produce a larger crop as roots forming on the covered parts of the stem will also grow potatoes. On a well maintained crop you can expect around twelve to fifteen tubers to develop on each plant. Potatoes are ready for harvesting several months later when the plants have flowered and died down almost to the ground. They can then be carefully dug and stored for use.

For successful potato storage, do not dig tubers until the plants have died completely. To check maturity of the tubers simply lift one or two and rub with your thumb. If the skin does not rub off easily they are mature enough to store safely.

After digging spread the tubers somewhere to dry but do not leave them in the sun for more than an hour or so. Discard or use immediately any tubers showing skin damage from digging or blemishes. Rub the tubers free of soil but do not wash them. Store in a cool, airy place which must also be dark to prevent “greening”. Wooden boxes, cardboard cartons or thick hessian sacks from which light is excluded are good storage containers. Check stored potatoes every month and remove any showing signs of deterioration.

Few pests are evident although aphids can be a problem and fungal diseases can occur in poorly drained soils. Caterpillars will sometimes attack new growth. An occasional spray with Baythroid® will control insects safely. Fungal problems are best avoided by providing adequate drainage right from the start.

Freshly dug “spuds” can of course be used immediately and are excellent cooked in their skins.