



Grow your own potatoes!

Growing your own potatoes at home is not difficult. There is a very good reason why potatoes are one of the most popular vegetables in the home garden. They're easy to grow, they store well for months and they taste delicious...

When to plant: In Alberta plant when the soil begins to warm up, usually in mid April.

Seed: The first thing the gardener will want to purchase is certified disease-free seed potatoes. Using potatoes purchased at a local convenience store is discouraged as they're not certified disease-free. Seed sources are available in the Consumer Section of the PGA website: www.albertapotatoes.ca

Which variety of potato to grow: Gardeners can choose from many different varieties: Russet Burbank is the most popular variety and suitable for most uses – baking, boiling, preparing salads and fries. Yukon Gold and Adora are yellow fleshed potatoes, while there are other coloured varieties available such as All Red and All Blue which are always an interesting addition to most dishes.

Planting

While potato seeds may be planted whole, usually they are cut into smaller chunks called “sets”. When you cut the chunk, each piece should have 2-3 eyes on it. It is preferable if the eyes have strong shoots (sprouts) on them when planted – these are the start of the haulms. Before planting the sets, many gardeners let them air out a day or two in a dry place so the freshly cut areas can dry up a bit. When planting the sets, the cut side should face-down into the soil. Potatoes should be planted in full sun; that's an area that gets at least 8 hours of sun per day.

- **Trench Method:** A traditional potato planting method involves digging one or more shallow trenches, about 6" deep. You'll want to space trenches about 1 meter (3 feet) apart. Place the seed potatoes in the trench, eyes facing up. You then cover the potatoes with a couple of inches of soil. As the potato plant grows, soil is continually hilled up along the sides of the plants. This keeps the soil around the developing tubers loose and keeps the surface tubers from being exposed to sunlight, which will turn them green and somewhat toxic. Hill soil whenever the plants reach about 4-6" in height.

- **Scatter Method:** Some gardeners prefer to simply lay the seed potatoes right on the soil and then cover them with a few inches of mulch. You can continue laying mulch as the plants grow. If you have a rodent problem, this method is probably not your best choice.

- **Container Method:** Potatoes are so easy to grow that they can be planted in bags, boxes, baskets, garbage cans and tire stacks. The container method makes hilling easy and takes up less space. Plant 3 - 4 seed potatoes in the bottom of the container, like a clean garbage can. Put about 6" of soil in the bottom first, then spread out your seed potatoes. Keep adding soil as the plants get taller – this will ensure a larger harvest of tubers later on when harvest time arrives.

As the plants grow, soil, straw or leaves should be hilled up around the growing stems. The bottom part of the plants and any tubers need to stay covered to avoid exposure to the sun.

Growing

You can grow potatoes in your home, outside, in a greenhouse, or start off inside and move them outside as the weather gets warmer.

Inside: Place the container somewhere with as much light as possible. Turn the bucket regularly so the plant grows straight, and keep the soil moist.

Outside: Grow your plants in full or partial sunlight - if frost is forecast, bring the plants inside or protect them with plastic, a blanket or straw.

In a greenhouse: If it's frosty, close all windows. If it's very sunny, make sure the greenhouse is well ventilated and doesn't overheat.

Keep potato plants well watered, especially when they start flowering. Soil should be moist, not dry. But don't over-water or the leaves will go mouldy and may be the source of certain diseases.

When the plant's leaves turn yellow and start to die, stop watering. After two or three weeks, the tubers in the ground will be small "baby" potatoes, which you can harvest. For bigger tubers, wait another four to six weeks.

Pests and diseases

If the leaves of your plants look mouldy, they could have a bacterial or fungal infection. If you think a plant is infected, dispose of it either by putting it securely in a garbage bag or by burying it. Be on the lookout for the Colorado Potato Beetle – a brightly coloured yellowish pest often found on potato plants. Check the plants very often for signs of these beetles and dispose of them as soon as possible.

Harvesting

So-called "new potatoes" are small, immature potatoes. You can harvest a few of these without harm to the plant, by gently feeling around in the soil near the plant once the plant reaches about a foot in height (about a month or so after planting), removing the biggest tubers from the soil and cover the roots back up again with soil.

The entire crop is ready to harvest once the tops of the plants die off, usually in about 3 - 4 months after emergence of the first plants. You can leave the potatoes in the ground for a few weeks longer, as long as the ground is not overly wet.

Storage

Store your potatoes on a shelf in a cool, dark, well-ventilated, dry place. Properly dried and stored potatoes keep well for up to six months.

The potato plant grows up to 100 cm tall and produces a tuber - also called a potato. The potato is so rich in nutrients that it ranks as the world's fourth most important food crop, after maize, wheat and rice. The potato belongs to the nightshade family of flowering plants. Most of the potatoes in Alberta are made into French Fries. A medium sized potato has around 100 calories and is an excellent energy source because it is a complex carbohydrate.

