

Friday's Feature

By

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Plant potatoes now for a bountiful harvest in spring

The potato is one of America's most popular vegetables. The Irish potato, not to be confused with the sweet potato, is a cool season crop and should be planted January through early March along the Gulf Coast. Potatoes are easy to grow and produce a bountiful harvest in a small space.

To grow a healthy potato crop, the soil must be properly prepared prior to planting. Potatoes prefer a loose, well-drained soil in a full sun location.

They do not grow well in flooded conditions and care must be taken to ensure that excess water in the root zone is drained. To do this, beds should be formed above the level of the soil at least ten to twelve inches to ensure that plants are above any standing water.

In a well drained soil, the addition of organic matter, such as compost, aids in water retention and contributes essential nutrients as it decomposes. In Florida, this organic matter should be added each year because it breaks down quickly in the hot and humid climate.

Irish potatoes also prefer a slightly acidic soil—pH between 5 and 6. If the pH is incorrect, it can cause a common tuber disease called potato scab. Common scab is normally a disease of alkaline soils of pH 7 or higher. Some strains cause scab in soils with pH below 5.0, but these are less common.

Once the soil is prepared, it's time to plant. The potato tuber is the plant "part" planted to grow a new potato plant. When the tuber is planted it is called a "seed" potato. Only certified seed potatoes should be planted in the home garden. Certification insures that the seed tubers are free of disease.

Do not purchase potatoes from the grocery store to plant in the home garden. These may carry harmful potato diseases that will hurt the growth of your crop. They may

also be treated with sprout inhibitors that may also hurt the growth of the plant in the garden.

Each seed potato should be cut into a two ounce size (the size of an egg) and should have two or more eyes. Allow the cut pieces to dry for a day or two to prevent rotting. Some gardeners prefer to treat the cut pieces with an approved garden fungicide and plant right away. Always read and follow label directions.

Plants should be spaced at about six to eight inches apart within the row with at least 36" between rows. Seed pieces should be planted 4" below the soil surface. Seed pieces should be planted with the cut side down and eyes (or sprouts) facing up.

As your potato plant grows, cultivate around it. Hilling is the act of adding soil to the top of the potato row. Since the seed piece was only planted four inches below the soil surface, there is the possibility that new potatoes will push up above the soil surface. These exposed tubers turn green in the sun and will be inedible. To prevent sun-burned tubers from forming, add about two or three inches of additional soil on the potato row when the sprout emerges from the soil.

Most potatoes are ready for harvest between 80-115 days after planting. To harvest potatoes, carefully dig below the potatoes with a shovel or spading fork and lift the potatoes.

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