

EARLY and SECOND EARLY POTATOES

Early potatoes are what we think of when new potatoes are mentioned – harvest cooked and eaten within a few hours for that magical new potato taste. New potatoes are often quite expensive in shops and so many gardeners like to grow these.

EARLIES take 10-12 weeks to mature and are usually harvested before blight sets in.

SECOND EARLIES take slightly longer at around 14-17 weeks to mature.

Chitting wakes the seed up and gives them a head start if you are planning to plant them in Spring. There is no need to chit if you are planting in April - May time.

Chit your seed by placing in egg boxes on a windowsill in a light, bright position. When the shoots are 3cm long they are ready to plant out.

PLANTING IN POTS

Small crops of potatoes can also be grown in large, deep containers, and this is a good way of getting an early batch of new potatoes. Fill the bottom 15cm (6in) of the container with potting compost and plant the seed potato just below this. As the new stems start growing, keep adding compost until the container is full.

Use a specially designed potato grow bag which will hold 1-2 plants, or a pot that is at least 30cm deep for one plant.

Potatoes are hungry plants, so apply a tomato feed according to the instructions.

PLANTING

Plant 12cm deep - 30 cm apart - in rows 60cm apart

You can plant potatoes up until mid May.

Please do not cut the tubers in half. Tubers have enough stored energy to get to the surface and produce a healthy crop. By cutting them you are risking the tuber going mouldy as it has no skin to protect it and lower yields.

Potatoes like to be watered but not water-logged and so ensure your pot or area has good drainage. Potatoes need a sunny site away from frost pockets - the newly emerging foliage is susceptible to frost damage in April and May.

The ground can be prepared the previous autumn or winter by digging in organic matter such as well-rotted animal manure or compost.

Do not use an area that has had potatoes or tomatoes in it the previous year as some diseases can remain in the soil. When the emerging shoots come through, you need to "earth" or "mound" them up - this is counter intuitive. Do this several times. This encourages downward growth - the new tubers will jostle for space and any growing near the surface will turn green.

HARVESTING

These early or second early potatoes do not store for too long. They can be planted in succession up until the end of June to ensure a longer supply.

With earlies, wait until the flowers open or the buds drop; the tubers are ready to harvest when they are the size of hens' eggs.

FAQs

- How do I water to avoid tuber Blight...
If your plants have started to succumb to blight. Try to water the soil around the base of the plant and avoid the leaves. Blight spores can travel from leaves to the tubers.
- My plants have no flowers...
That is fine, potatoes do not need to flower to create tubers. Sometimes they briefly flower and sometimes not at all.
- My plant has a tomato thing growing on it...
After flowering the potato plant produces a seed pod that looks like a tomato, as they are closely related. If you have curious toddlers around, it might be an idea to remove the pod in case they try to eat them. They are not poisonous to the touch.

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