

POTATO

Potatoes, often called Irish potatoes, are one of the most important world food crops and a staple for many large gardens. Potatoes are tubers, or swollen underground stems that form as a storage location for starch. Tubers form best at temperatures of 60-70° F; therefore, early spring planting or fall planting is preferable in Kansas. Potatoes are grown from cut pieces of tubers grown in northern areas the previous season, usually referred to as seed potatoes.



Varieties

Skin color can be white, red, or russet (brown). Common red-skinned varieties include Red Norland, La Rouge, La Soda, Viking, and Reddale. White-skinned varieties include Superior, Norchip, Crystal, Kennebec, and Irish Cobbler. Russet-skinned varieties include Norgold and Norkotah.

Varieties differ in texture as well. The russet varieties are particularly good for baking as they have a mealy crumbly texture when baked. White or red varieties are usually preferred for boiling or mashing. Consult your local Extension office for additional variety information.

Cutting and preparing seed

Select firm, solid seed potatoes with a blue tag on the bag (inspected to be free of diseases). Cut the tubers into 1½-2-ounce pieces. An average-sized potato is cut into four pieces, while a large potato is cut into six. Store the cut seed in a warm humid location for 2-3 days to allow the freshly cut surface to "heal." This prevents the seed piece from rotting when planted. Always purchase new potato seed. Do not use your own tubers for seed as reductions in yield and vigor will result.

When to plant

Mid-March--St. Patrick's Day--is a traditional time to plant spring potatoes in Kansas while early to mid-July is the time to plant for a fall harvest.

Spacing

Plant seed 12 inches apart in rows 3 feet apart. Plant the seed less than 2 inches deep in the spring, or 4-5 inches deep for a fall planting.

Care

Potatoes develop along the main stem of the plant, above the seed piece. To encourage large yields and to prevent sunburning, potatoes should be hilled or ridged, pulling loose soil along the row as the crop is growing. This ridge or hill eventually should be 8-12 inches tall. Potatoes like a fertile well-drained location with loose, friable soil. Potatoes need regular consistent watering, especially during development when the plants are 6-12 inches tall. Irregular watering lowers yields and may result in rough knobs on the tubers. Mulches can be useful in holding moisture near the plant.

Harvesting

Early or new potatoes can be harvested as the plants are growing by gently removing some plants in the row. Begin digging potatoes when the vines are about half dead. Remove excess vines and carefully dig the tubers. Allow them to surface dry out of the sun for a day or more to toughen the skin and prevent sunburning. Then move potatoes into a cold dark location for storage. Ideal storage temperature is below 40° F.

Common concerns

Scab (use certified seed)
Colorado potato beetles
Early blight
Leafhoppers

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