All About Potatoes

If you have been gardening in Kansas for long, you probably know of the tradition to plant your potatoes on St. Patrick’s Day. In the Post Rock District, you may want to wait a little later, depending on the weather, but plan to get your potatoes in the ground by the first of April. Whether you are new to gardening or a pro, potatoes are an easy crop that can be grown in containers or the garden. Follow these tips to have a successful harvest this summer.

When purchasing potatoes buy quality seed potatoes that have been inspected and are disease free. You don’t want to use potatoes from the produce section of the grocery store because they are often sprayed with chemicals to slow sprouting. Seed potatoes are certified disease free and have plenty of starch to sprout as quickly as the soil temperatures allow. Each pound of potatoes will yield approximately eight to ten seed pieces. One pound should be enough to plant roughly a ten-foot row.

Before planting the potatoes, cut the seed pieces two to three days prior so freshly cut surfaces have a chance to “suberize”, or heal, and form a protective coating. Store the seed pieces in a warm location during this process to speed the healing along. Most seed potatoes can be cut into four pieces; though large potatoes may be cut into a few more. Each seed piece should be between one and a half to two ounces to insure there is enough energy for germination. Make sure each seed piece is about the size of an egg and has at least one “eye” for new growth.

Potatoes thrive in loose, easily tilled soils high in organic matter. Avoid heavy, “sticky” soils and areas where water drains slowly or stands for a long time. If this isn’t possible in your backyard garden, consider planting in a large container or grow sack.

Plant each seed piece about one to two inches deep and eight to twelve inches apart in rows. Though it is important to plant potatoes in early Spring, emergence is slow. As the potatoes grow, pull soil up to the base of the plants. New potatoes will grow above the planted seed piece, and it is important to keep sunlight from hitting the new potatoes. Exposed potatoes will turn green and can’t be eaten. Keeping the potatoes covered with soil will prevent this from happening.
Potatoes should not be grown in the same location year after year. A three-year rotation reduces pest problems that may accumulate with continual potato crops and uses soil nutrients not used by other garden crops.

If you plant a potato patch this spring, chances are you will taste a difference from those store bought spuds. If you have any questions on planting potatoes contact your local Post Rock District Extension Office.

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at choman@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (738-3597).