

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Thiessen March 14, 2025

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All About Potatoes

Potatoes are one of the world's most important food crops. Grown in more than 100 countries, only wheat and rice are produced in higher quantities for human consumption. If you plan to grow your own potatoes, early spring is the best time to plant them in the garden. If you are a gardener, you probably know the tradition of planting potatoes on St. Patrick's Day. Actually, anytime from mid- to late March is fine for potato planting.

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 ensure enough energy for germination.

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. Plant the seed piece of potato with the eye facing upward. Though planting potatoes in early spring is important, emergence is slow. Plants typically begin emerging in early to mid-April. 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.

Harvest the potatoes when vines begin to die, ideally when vines are half dead. Potatoes dug earlier than this should be handled carefully to prevent scarring the tender skins. Potatoes planted in mid-March should be ready to harvest in early to late July, depending on the planting date, the earliness of the variety, and the growing conditions.

If you plant a potato patch this spring, you will likely taste a difference from those store-bought spuds. If you have any questions about growing 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 cthiessen@ksu.edu or by calling The Beloit Extension Office (785-738-3597).