

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Thiessen June 16, 2023

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Harvesting Potatoes

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 degrees, therefore, early spring planting or fall planting is preferable in Kansas.

Potatoes develop along the main stem of the plant, above the seed piece. To encourage large yields and to prevent sun burning, 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.

Many gardeners look forward to harvesting new potatoes early in the season. They can be harvested about 6-8 weeks after planting. New potatoes are immature and should be about the size of walnuts. Pull soil away from the base of the plants to see if the tubers are the desired size. New potatoes will have formed above the seed piece you planted, so dig down about a foot, and turn the whole plant over to pick the tubers. Some gardeners dig beside the plants and take a few potatoes, but leave the plants in place to produce more. It is important to lay the new potatoes out for a few hours to dry before handling.

Potato crops are ready to harvest when the vines are about half dead. If you dig potatoes too early, they will have tender skins and are easily bruised. However, delaying digging will allow the soil to heat since it is no longer shaded by foliage. High soil temperatures can lead to sprouting potatoes. To harvest, remove excess vines and carefully dig the tubers. Dig potatoes very gently with a spading fork. Bruises and cuts sustained during the harvest will allow entry of soil-borne fungi and bacteria that cause storage rots. Allow potatoes to "set" by keeping them in

a shady, dry location for three to four days. Gently brush any dried soil off the tubers, but do not wash them. Then move them to a cool, moist environment such as a cellar or cool basement for longer storage. Ideal storage temperature is below 40 degrees. Occasionally check the potatoes, removing any that are soft or shriveled.

Potatoes are fun to grow and even more fun to eat. If you have any questions about growing or harvesting potatoes contact your local 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 c Thiessen@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597).