‘Tis the season to plant potatoes

The summer heat is still beating down and gardeners across the state continue to harvest tomatoes, squash and other summer crops. Despite the heat, now is the time for gardening enthusiasts to set their sights on a fall garden.

One crop that’s delicious, versatile and fairly easy to grow is Irish potatoes. If your space permits, potatoes are a highly desirable crop that helps supplement your food supply. Keep in mind that while yields may be lower than spring-planted potatoes, long-term proper storage is much easier, and the quality is quite good.

One challenge gardeners may face is getting a stand of plants early enough to produce a crop before the first fall frost. Seed potatoes used for fall planting aren’t cut, but planted whole. This helps alleviate some of the common disease issues that may be encountered with cut seed. It’s best to use potatoes that are 1 inch to 1.5 inches in diameter.

However, if you only have medium to large potatoes, cut them into 1 ounce to 1.5 ounce pieces and allow them to cure for three to five days before planting. During the curing process, store the cut pieces between 45 and 65 degrees Fahrenheit.

Typically, if you use potatoes from the spring harvest as seed potatoes, they’ll have to go through a physiological resting period of about 90 days after digging before they’ll sprout. So, potatoes that were dug in mid-April are good to plant now. Don’t be too concerned if the potatoes don’t sprout soon after planting.

Space the seed potatoes about a foot apart within the row and allow about 3 feet between each row. The planted seed potatoes should be covered with about 2 inches of soil. It’s important to properly irrigate the soil and then cover with mulch such as straw or other organic material. This helps provide more favorable growing conditions.

Irish potatoes take about 90 to 110 days from planting to harvest, so potatoes planted within the next few weeks should be ready by mid-November. Leave the potatoes in the field as long as possible to reach maturity. Also, be sure to remove potato vines after a frost and before a freeze to prevent damage to the potatoes.

Finally, dig up the potatoes before an extended wet period because poor drainage will cause the potatoes to rot.

If all goes well, you’ll have plenty of potatoes to put on the table for the holiday season.