Cool-season crops should go in the ground soon

The weather a few weeks ago certainly put the deep freeze on gardening activities, but with warmer temperatures on the horizon, gardeners are ready to get down to business.

Now is the best time to get those cool-season crops in the ground, including carrots, cabbage, peas and potatoes. Today, the focus is on potatoes, a very versatile cool-season crop. Who doesn’t like a baked potato, mashed potatoes, fried potatoes or potato cakes?

No, you can’t go to the local nursery and buy a packet of potato seeds. Potato plants are started from seed potatoes, which means the plants are started from small sections of the potato tuber. The tuber is the portion of the potato plant that we eat. Potato plants form tubers to store large amounts of carbohydrates over the winter. In the spring, new shoots develop from wintered tubers.

Seed potatoes can be purchased at the local garden center. Use only certified seed tubers. Just as there are many ways to prepare potatoes, there are many cultivars available. To prepare the seed pieces, cut the tuber into quarters, making sure each section has at least two good eyes. It’s important to plant good-sized pieces to ensure a large yield.

If tubers are small, gardeners may want to leave them whole. After cutting the tubers, leave the seeds in a well-ventilated location to cure for at least three days. This will allow the surface to heal and harden, reducing the chance of rotting.

While the seeds are curing is a great time to prepare the planting bed. Potatoes need loose, rich soil in a sunny area. To loosen soil, turn it and incorporate large amounts of organic matter. Once the soil is turned, dig trenches 4 inches to 5 inches deep along the length of the bed. Rows should be spaced 2 feet to 3 feet apart.

Set the cured potato seeds into the trenches with the cut side facing down and with the eyes directed upward about 1 foot apart. Next, cover the seed pieces with enough soil to bury them 5 inches to 6 inches deep. Depending on the soil temperature, sprouts will emerge in a couple of weeks. If there’s still a danger of frost, and you know there is in Oklahoma’s unpredictable spring weather, pull up the soil around the stems for protection or cover the stems with plastic milk jugs or juice bottles with the tops cut off.

When the plants are about 8 inches high, they’ll need to be hilled, which simply means pulling the soil up around the potato plants. Hilling is critical to producing numerous large potatoes because it creates a space for the tubers to develop. Use a hoe to pull the soil up from both sides.
of the row and cover half of the exposed stem. Repeat this process again in about two to three weeks. Be sure to add another 3 inches to 4 inches of soil. Hill again in a couple of weeks, but add only about 1 inch to 2 inches of soil to the hill.

The hills also keep the tubers out of sunlight, which can cause them to turn green and produce harmful glycoalkaloids. Glycoalkaloids can be toxic, especially if eaten in large amounts. Keep the tubers out of sunlight, both during growth and after harvest.

Be sure there is enough soil on the hills to completely cover the developing tubers. Check periodically and add more soil if the tubers are poking through the surface.

Oklahoma State University Extension offers additional information about potato production on its website.

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