



It's time to get tubers in the ground

Whether you like them baked, mashed or fried, it's time for gardeners to get their potatoes in the ground to ensure a bountiful harvest later in the growing season.

Although many vegetables are planted as seeds, potatoes are a bit different. Potato plants are started from seed potatoes, which are small section of the potato tuber. The tuber is the part of the potato plant we bake, mash or fry and then eat.

Potato plants form tubers to store carbohydrates over the winter. New shoots develop from the eyes of the wintered potatoes. It's not a good idea to plant potatoes purchased at the grocery store as these may have been treated to keep tubers dormant. Also, disease may infect the potatoes, which can remain in the soil for a long time. It's best to purchase seed potatoes from the local garden center.

To prepare the seed pieces, cut the tubers into quarters, making sure each section has at least two good eyes. If the tubers are small, cut them in half or leave them whole. After cutting the tubers, leave the pieces in a well-ventilated location and allow to cure for about three days. This allows the surface to heal and harden, which will reduce the chance of rotting.

Prepare the planting bed while the potato pieces are curing. Potatoes grow best in loose, rich soil. Turn the soil and incorporate a good amount of organic matter. Once the soil is prepped for planting, dig trenches 5 to 6 inches deep the entire length of the bed. Space rows 30 to 36 inches apart. Set the cured potato pieces cut side down with the eye facing up. Space the pieces 10 to 12 inches apart and cover with about 5 inches of soil.

Sprouts will emerge in about two weeks, depending on soil temperature. In the event of frost, the sprouts may need to be covered with plastic milk jugs to protect them. Hill up the soil along the plants about halfway up and repeat this process in two to three weeks. Make sure there's enough soil on the hills to completely cover the developing tubers. Add more soil if you discover a tuber poking through the surface.

Soak the surface thoroughly once or twice per week. An inch of water will moisten sandy soil to about 10 inches deep and a clay soil up to 6 inches. Gardeners can use a trowel to see how far down the soil is wet. If it's only an inch or so, keep watering.

Harvest will begin when the plants have dried or when tubers have reached full size. Be careful not to pierce the tubers with the spading fork when harvesting. Don't store any damaged tubers because they spoil quickly. Eat them first.

After harvest, store the potatoes in a 60 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit area that is well-ventilated and allow the skins to set. Keep them in the dark or under cover to cure for about 10 days. Gently brush any soil from the tuber, but don't wash them. Remove any sprouts before using the tubers as food. Potato sprouts can be toxic.

Check out [Oklahoma State University Extension](#)'s website for more [gardening information](#).

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