



Mile of Potatoes Project

Help Sheet 1 – Preparation and Planting

Deciding What to Grow

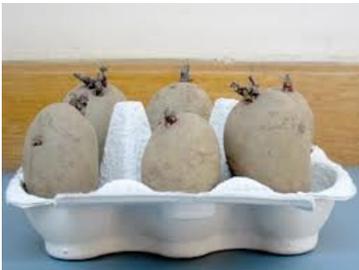
There are dozens of different potato varieties, usually described as early, second early and maincrop potatoes. These names indicate when they crop, the space you'll need, how closely and when they can be planted. Like all youngsters, seed potatoes require the right environment to grow and flourish, so bear these factors in mind when you decide which young potatoes to rear.



You should concentrate on the earlier types if you're short of space, and it's also worth remembering that they are less likely to encounter pest problems as they're lifted so much earlier in the year. Earlies will be ready to harvest 12-15 weeks after planting so you can begin taste the fruits of your labour from mid-June.

Second earlies take a little longer to mature (16-17 weeks), so you should be able to release them from the soil from late June through to early August. Our late developers (the Maincrops) are ready 18 - 20 weeks after planting. They can be lifted from July through to October. Maincrops take up the most space in the garden, but tend to be the best for storage.

How to Chit



Chitting simply means encouraging your young seeds to sprout before planting. Start chitting from late January in warmer parts of the country or in February in cooler areas, about six weeks before you intend to plant out your potatoes.

Each seed potato has a more rounded, blunt bottom end that has a number of 'eyes'. Gently rest the baby tubers with their bottoms uppermost in trays or old egg boxes, with plenty of natural light. The potatoes are ready to be planted out when their little shoots are 1.5-2.5cm (0.5-1in) long.

How and When to Plant

Allow your baby spuds to develop to their full potential by giving them enough room to expand when growing. Early potatoes should be planted about 30cm (12in) apart with 40-50cm (16-20in) between the rows, and second earlies and maincrops about 38cm (15in) apart with 75cm (30in) between the rows.



Once the sun has begun to warm the earth's soil, you can begin planting your chitted potatoes. This is usually from mid-March or early April. Start by digging a trench 7.5-13cm (3-5in) deep, although the exact depth will vary according to the variety of potato you're planting.

Add a light sprinkling of fertiliser to the trench before you begin planting in order to give your potatoes the extra nourishment they need. Handle your chitted tubers with care, gently setting them into the trench with the shoots pointing upwards, being careful not to break the shoots. Cover your baby potatoes lightly with soil.

Growing Tips

Like many of us, potatoes love the sun, so avoid planting them in frost-prone sites, as these conditions can damage their developing foliage. If you're starting up a vegetable plot on very weedy ground or old grassland, potatoes can be a great asset as their fast-growing, extensive foliage can help swamp out the weeds.

As soon as the shoots appear, earth up each plant by covering it with a ridge of soil so that the shoots are just buried. You need to do this at regular intervals and by the end of the season each plant will have a small mound around it about 15cm (6in) high.

If you're very short of space and only have a balcony or patio outside, you can still nurture and grow potatoes. Place them in an adequately drained container that's at least 30cm (1ft) deep and wide. Half fill the pot with multi-purpose compost or good quality, fertile garden soil, nestle your seed potatoes into the top of the compost and then top up with more compost or soil to within 2.5cm (1in) of the rim of the container.



It's particularly important that there's adequate water once the tubers have reached the size of marbles as they get quite thirsty! Unless there's regular, ample rainfall, make sure you water your potatoes, otherwise their growth will be stunted and so will your crop.

Companion Planting



Companion planting is based around the idea that certain plants can help each other out when planted next to, or close to one another. This method is used to control pests naturally without the need to use chemicals, giving your crop a much healthier upbringing. In some cases using this natural approach can also give you a higher crop yield.

The best companion plant for potatoes is horseradish as it increases their disease resistance. Beans, cabbages and marigolds are also said to be good friends with the potato while cucumbers, tomatoes and sunflowers are to be avoided.

Lunar Planting

Planting by the cycle of the moon is an ancient tradition which developed when farmers noticed that different crops grew better when planted during different phases of the moon. It is thought the results are connected with lunar light or gravitational pull.

The simplest moon planting rule is to plant crops that produce above the ground during the increasing light of the moon (from new moon to full moon) and to plant crops that produce below the ground (such as our beloved potatoes) during the decreasing light of the moon (from full moon to new moon).



If you choose to adopt the lunar planting method then you should be looking to plant your potatoes from 8th – 22nd March with the 9th, 10th, 11th, 18th and 19th being particularly auspicious dates! In April plant from 6th – 21st taking note that the 6th, 7th, 14th and 15th are the best days.