

Gardeners Shouldn't Be In The Dark About Growing Potatoes

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Potato production has a long and rich history in Pennsylvania, but a vegetable expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences said you don't need to be a large grower to raise super tubers.

"Many people in rural areas grow potatoes in home gardens, but urban and suburban gardeners seem to shy away from home grown potatoes," said Bill Lamont, associate professor of vegetable crops. "Potatoes can be grown in a variety of sizes, shapes and colors, and there's nothing better than eating potatoes fresh from the garden."

Potatoes should be started in late March or early April. All potatoes are grown from seed pieces, in which a seed potato is halved or quartered so that each section retains at least one eye. The seed piece should weigh at least 1½ ounces.

"You can get seed potatoes at any garden center," Lamont said. "But to get gourmet or different varieties, check in seed catalogs or on the Internet."

Before planting, let the sliced sections sit five to seven days in a warm, humid place until the cut surface heals over and dries. Plant when the soil temperatures have been at a steady 50 degrees for at least a week.

Lamont recommends planting each seed piece at least 4 inches deep and 9 inches apart, leaving about 3 feet between rows to give the gardener room to work. When the plant has sprouted to about 6 inches, cover the plant with soil so that just the top foliage shows.

"This is called 'hilling' the potato," Lamont said. "Covering the plant with soil allows the plant to develop shoots that will form potatoes in the hilled soil."

Lamont said gardeners should not expect uniform growth from potatoes. "The eyes on a potato don't develop at the same time, so the plants will emerge at different times," he said.

Depending on the variety, potatoes take between 90 and 120 days to reach maturity. "You can dig potatoes at any time, though, depending on your taste," Lamont said. "If you like small potatoes, you can dig them well before 90 days are up."

Home gardeners should test soil before fertilization. Soil test kits are available for a nominal fee at any Penn State Cooperative Extension county office. Lamont recommends using a 10-10-10 fertilizer if the garden has been well fertilized. If the garden has not been fertilized, Lamont recommends a 5-10-10 fertilizer. "Don't grow potatoes in the same location

year after year," he said.

"A 3-year rotation should be fine."

Too much moisture can limit potato growth, but plants should be watered regularly. Lamont recommends using drip irrigation tape to reduce moisture on leaves. "Excess moisture can cause late and early blight to develop," he said.

Potatoes are mature when the plant foliage has naturally died. Gardeners should wait two weeks after vine die-back to harvest. "The wait allows the skins to set and reduces skin peeling, bruising and rot in storage," Lamont said. "Dry the potatoes for 3 or 4 days in a warm shady spot before storing. Potatoes exposed to sun and high temperatures will turn green and rot."

Potatoes are subject to several severe diseases that require either chemical applications or other controls. "When using fungicides and pesticides, be sure to follow all directions and precautions on the label," Lamont cautioned.

• **Early Blight:** This foliage disease shows brown circular spots in a target pattern. Contrary to its name, early blight usually occurs in mid- to late growing season. It develops quickly in

warm, damp weather and can be controlled with fungicides.

• **Late Blight.** Late blight can occur at any time in the growing season under favorable conditions such as cool nights, rainy periods, dews, fog or humidity levels above 90 percent. The disease is commonly passed on from potatoes planted the previous season. "Plant healthy seed potatoes and destroy all potatoes from the previous season," Lamont said.

Other diseases include common scab, which often can be controlled using certified seed and watering consistently; and viral diseases, which can be controlled using

certified seed and by controlling insects, which often spread viruses.

• **Colorado Potato Beetle:** These foliage feeders can be controlled by pesticides, although gardeners can control small plots by picking adults off leaves. The beetles lay bright orange eggs on the underside of potato leaves, and Lamont recommends smearing the egg masses. "Crop rotation reduces potato beetle populations as well," he said.

• **Leafhoppers:** Leafhoppers suck plant juices out of the undersides of leaves. Gardeners can use pesticides recommended for this insect.

Scholarship Awarded

GENEVA, N.J. — Rebecca Scott, a senior at Cornell University from Cornwall, N.Y., received a \$1,000 scholarship from Valent BioSciences Corporation during the Cornell Fruit Field Day 2000 Aug. 17.

The scholarship was awarded in conjunction with the New York State Horticultural Society.

Scott, who has worked at the Hudson Valley Laboratory in Highland, N.Y., hopes to become an extension educator in fruits after she graduates.

"It was the community that surrounded me in the fruit industry when I was working at the Hudson Valley Lab that encouraged me to continue on," she said.

Regina Rieckenberg, of Valent BioSciences, and Kevin Bowman, president of the New York State Horticultural Society, presented the check to Scott.

Candidates for 2001 can be nominated through the NYS Hort Society. Contact Kevin Bowman at (315) 787-2404 for more information.

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