FACT SHEET 18

Potatoes

Potatoes are a must-have vegetable in the garden. They're a tasty and versatile addition to any meal. And not much beats home-grown potatoes at Christmas lunch or dinner.

Where to start

For disease free spuds, always buy and plant certified 'seed' potatoes, rather than any regular shooting potato. Seed potatoes are certified disease-free tubers which look like regular potatoes but are usually a little smaller.

Choosing a variety

Choose the type of potato based on when you want to harvest and then what you want to do with it. Check out the range shown and their features to help you decide.

Potatoes vary in their make up. Some are called 'waxy' potatoes, and these are lower in starch and hold together much better when cooking - they are more suitable for salads and boiling, the classic 'new potatoes'. Other varieties are called 'floury' potatoes, and these are higher in starch and ideal for wedges, chips, roasting and mashing. The earlier potatoes tend to be more the waxy types, and the later varieties more floury."

NZ Bulbs has 12 different varieties of seed potatoes available including well known varieties like Jersey Benne, Agria and Rua.

For a general-purpose potato, try Desiree or Rua. If you want to serve home-grown spuds at Christmas plant the early varieties. These can be harvested after about 90 days so, if planted in September, will be ready for Christmas.

Early Varieties

Cliff Kidney
Waxy, 80-90 days

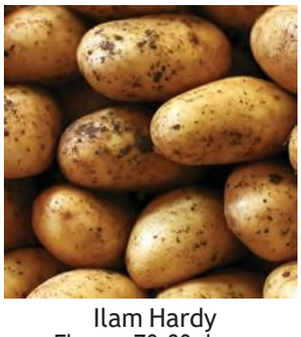
Jersey Benne
Waxy, 80-90 days

Rocket
Waxy, 60-70 days

Swift
Waxy, 60-70 days

Early - Main varieties

Heather
Waxy, 80-90 days



Ilam Hardy
Floury, 70-80 days

Nadine
Waxy, 80-90 days

Purple Passion
All-purpose, 70-80 days

Potatoes ~ continued

Main Crop varieties

Agria
Floury, 90-100 days

Desiree
All purpose, 90-100 days

Red Rascal
Floury, 90-100 days

Rua
All purpose, 100 days

Preparation

Once purchased, remove the seed potatoes from the bag or container and leave them in a light, dry place to sprout for a few weeks – somewhere like a garage bench or garden shed is ideal.

When the shoots are around 2cm long they're ready to plant. Before doing so, add some compost to the soil and mix well. A well composted garden will give you better results come harvest time as it makes the soil more friable and easier to work.

Planting

Dig a trench about 15cm deep and place the potatoes in the bottom of it - approximately 40cm apart. Don't fill the trench back up, just cover the planted potatoes with at least 5cm of soil. New spuds hate Jack Frost, so keep an eye on them and as the shoots start to push through, cover them a little more each week until the trench has been turned into a mound of 15-20cm in height. The more growing stem beneath the soil, the more opportunity for the plant to produce potatoes and the bigger the crop.

Once planted cover the crop with some insect-proof netting which will keep out the potato-tomato psyllid, a small insect that can cause a lot of damage to tomato and potato crops. The netting is a perfect non-spray method to ensure the potatoes stay healthy and yield a great crop.

Make sure the netting is tucked into the soil all around the edges and keep it loose so the potatoes can easily grow up beneath.

Because the plants can be attacked by the psyllid at any growth stage, put the netting on the potatoes once planted and keep it on until harvest. Put the netting on loosely at the start or loosen it as they get bigger. Make sure the plants aren't pushing hard against it or being damaged and that it is tucked into the dirt securely on all edges.

Care while growing

Once a month mound the soil around the potato plant. Ensure 5cm of the plant's stem is left sticking out the top. To keep diseases away don't overhead water the potatoes excessively. Once planted the rain should be enough to keep them going until they're ready for harvesting.

Harvest

The best way to tell if the potatoes are ready is to dig a few up to check. Use a fork and loosen the dirt around a few of the potato plants, gently pull out a spud ensuring the shoot connecting it to the plant doesn't get broken. If the potatoes are small, cover them up again with dirt and leave to mature further.

Post harvest

Once the potatoes are harvested dig the remainder of the plant back into the ground. The top growth has plenty of good nutrients in it and working it into the soil helps to improve the soil structure in the same way that adding compost does.

Exercise

1. *What are seed potatoes, and why should you use them instead of regular potatoes?*
2. *Why is it important to let seed potatoes sprout before planting them? How long should the shoots be before planting?*
3. *How does adding compost to the soil help potatoes grow better?*
4. *Where should you store your seed potatoes to sprout, and why is that location ideal?*
5. *How deep should you dig the trench when planting potatoes, and how far apart should they be placed?*
6. *Why is it important to cover the planted potatoes with at least 5cm of soil?*
7. *What is the purpose of covering potatoes with soil as they grow, and how tall should the mound be by the end?*
8. *Why should you use insect-proof netting on your potato plants, and which pest is it protecting them from?*
9. *How often should you mound the soil around your potato plants, and how much of the plant's stem should be left exposed?*
10. *What is the best way to water potatoes to avoid disease, and why is this method important?*
11. *How can you tell if your potatoes are ready to be harvested?*
12. *What tools can you use to harvest potatoes, and why is it important to be careful when removing them from the soil?*
13. *What should you do with the top growth of the potato plant after harvesting?*
14. *How does working the top growth into the soil help your garden?*

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Answers

1. *What are seed potatoes, and why should you use them instead of regular potatoes?*
   Seed potatoes are certified disease-free tubers that are specifically used for planting. You should use them instead of regular potatoes because they are free from diseases that could harm your crop.
2. *Why is it important to let seed potatoes sprout before planting them? How long should the* shoots be before planting?
   Allowing seed potatoes to sprout before planting gives them a head start for growth. The shoots should be about 2cm long before planting.
3. *How does adding compost to the soil help potatoes grow better?*
   Adding compost improves soil structure, making it looser and easier to work with. It also adds nutrients that help the potatoes grow stronger and healthier.
4. *Where should you store your seed potatoes to sprout, and why is that location ideal?*
   Seed potatoes should be stored in a light, dry place like a garage bench or garden shed. This location is ideal because it helps them sprout without being exposed to too much moisture or darkness.
5. *How deep should you dig the trench when planting potatoes, and how far apart should they be placed?*
   The trench should be about 15cm deep, and the potatoes should be placed 40cm apart in the trench.
6. *Why is it important to cover the planted potatoes with at least 5cm of soil?*
   Covering the potatoes with soil helps protect them and encourages healthy growth while preventing frost damage.
7. *What is the purpose of covering potatoes with soil as they grow, and how tall should the mound be by the end?*
   As the potatoes grow, covering them with soil encourages the plant to produce more potatoes along the stems. By the end, the mound should be about 15-20cm tall.
8. *Why should you use insect-proof netting on your potato plants, and which pest is it protecting them from?*
   The netting helps protect the potatoes from the potato-tomato psyllid, a small insect that can cause damage to the plants.
9. *How often should you mound the soil around your potato plants, and how much of the plant's stem should be left exposed?*
   You should mound the soil around your potatoes once a month. Leave about 5cm of the plant's stem exposed above the soil.
10. What is the best way to water potatoes to avoid disease, and why is this method important?
    It is important not to overwater the potatoes, as too much watering can promote disease. Natural rainfall is usually sufficient, and it prevents the plants from getting too wet at the top, which can lead to rot.
11. *How can you tell if your potatoes are ready to be harvested?*
    You can tell if your potatoes are ready by digging up a few to check their size. If they are small, cover them again and leave them to mature further.
12. *What tools can you use to harvest potatoes, and why is it important to be careful when removing them from the soil?*
    Use a fork to loosen the soil around the potatoes. It is important to be careful not to break the shoots connecting the potatoes to the plant, as this can damage the tubers.
13. *What should you do with the top growth of the potato plant after harvesting?*
    After harvesting, dig the top growth back into the soil to return nutrients to the soil and improve its structure.
14. *How does working the top growth into the soil help your garden?*
    The top growth contains nutrients that improve soil health. Mixing it into the soil helps add organic matter, which makes the soil better for future planting.

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