



## POTATOES

Potatoes are great fun to grow. Digging them up is as pleasurable as diving for treasure in a bran tub as, for each seed potato that you have planted, there will be a dozen or more. It is very important to buy top quality seed potatoes with a health certificate. Potatoes are prone to bad diseases and are subject to strict growing laws. The Great Irish Famine of the 1840s was caused by potato blight as potatoes were shared amongst families and friends. NEVER try growing potatoes from old stock or from the greengrocer or supermarket.

Garden centres only stock a limited selection as seed potatoes take up space and there is little profit in them. The catalogues, in contrast, have lots of interesting varieties. There are over 100 seed potatoes to buy in the UK. Potatoes come by types – floury for mashing, waxy for salad etc – and in three main categories – heritage, post-War-to-1972, and modern.

Popular heritage varieties like King Edward have survived because of their excellent qualities. But it's the post-War-to-1972 varieties that dominate the market. They include the world's most popular red, 'Desirée' and the 'chip shop favourite', 'Maris Piper'. Modern varieties are more expensive as they carry Plant Breeder's Rights.

Mostly bred to please supermarkets, they are inclined to be strong on shelf life, uniformity and good looks – virtues of little interest to the home gardener. However, much work has gone into disease resistance and this is useful.

An outstanding example of clever breeding is the 'Sarpo Mira' potato which was developed over 15 years in Hungary. It is the first potato that is almost totally resistant to potato blight. Another interesting introduction is the first low carb, low cal spud, 'Vivaldi' – er, so called as it is available in the shops in all four seasons. Some of the most fashionable potatoes in smart restaurants are the heritage varieties – e.g. the knobbly salad potato 'Pink Fir Apple' (1850) and its smoother-shaped French counterpart 'La Ratte' (1872).

On the downside, potatoes are an untidy crop. Where space is at a premium, like in KHWG, it might be a good idea to grow them in a barrel or 'potato sack'. This way, you can give them the slightly acid soil that is best for them. They grow well in John Innes No. 3 with some well-rotted compost or manure mixed in. Wherever you grow them make sure that they get plenty of sun and good drainage. The first 'earlies' – new potatoes – grow fast. They are planted around Easter (aiming for a month before the end of the frosts), are ready to harvest ten weeks later – around June – and are eaten shortly after as they don't store for long. Second earlies will be a little larger and be ready in July and will store for a bit. 'Maincrop' potatoes, the heaviest producers, are planted at about the same time but left in the ground (or barrel) until late summer or early autumn. They will store right through winter.

### Chitting

To get the maximum choice, order your seed potatoes as soon as you can. They will probably appear in February ready for 'chitting'. Chitting is not essential but it speeds up growth. Save some egg boxes for the purpose. When the seed potatoes arrive, place them in the egg boxes,

with the side with the most 'eyes' or buds (the 'rose end') upwards. Rub off the ones on the other side. Keep them in a light spot but out of direct sunlight at a temperature of 18°C/64°F (normal house temperature). When they start to shoot, move them to a cooler spot. It takes about six weeks for the buds to grow around 2.5cms/1 inch, when they are ready for planting.

## Planting

Delay if the weather is bad as potatoes cannot stand a frost. Plant earlies around 30cms (1ft) apart and maincrops about 45cms (18 ins) apart. Earth them up as they grow to prevent them rising above the surface and getting poisonous green patches. If planting in a barrel, bury them at the bottom under 10cms/6ins of compost. As the tubers start to grow, add on another 10cms/4ins of compost. Keep going in the same way until the tubers leaf up. If the weather turns dry, give them a good watering once a week.

## No-dig method

Spread well rotted manure or garden compost on top at the rate of a barrowload of manure, or two of compost, per 10 sq m (11 sq yd). Lay your seed potatoes on top in early April or late April in a cold spring. No-dig potatoes are more prone to frost damage. Cover with 7.5cms (3ins) straw. Protect the shoots overnight with fleece or newspapers if the weather turns cold. As the potatoes start to emerge, pile on more to exclude light. Finish off with a thick layer of grass mowings. Alternatively you can cover the area with heavy black plastic. The only disadvantage to this method is that it encourages slugs.

## Harvesting

First and second earlies are ready to harvest when in flower. Dig them up as you need them. For maincrop varieties, wait until the foliage has died down. Dig them up on a sunny day and let them dry out on the surface for a few hours before storing them in a dark, frost-free, but airy, place in potato sacks.

## Choice 'early' potatoes

**Red Duke of York.** First Early. (1940s). Very popular, delicious flavour. Especially good roasted.

**Jersey Royal.** Second Early. (1890) – deservedly the most famous new potato ever. It appears in catalogues as 'International Kidney'.

**Charlotte.** Second Early. (1981). Modern French variety. Easy to grow. Delicious, creamy salad potato or can be allowed to grow bigger.

**Kestrel.** Second Early. (1992). Good disease resistance, so ideal for the organic grower. Dominates show classes. Excellent all rounder.

**Ratte.** Second Early. (1872). Great tasting salad potatoes – not generally available in the supermarkets. France's top favourite.

Text © Caroline Foley 2008