

# Growing potatoes

Growing potatoes is fairly straightforward. They grow in practically any soil type and are a good first crop as they break up the soil ready for other crops. Potatoes can also be grown in containers.

**First earlies, second earlies, and main crops:** As well as indicating when the tubers will be ready, these categories are also loosely a guide to what to use them for. Early potatoes tend to have a waxier texture, hold their shape when boiled and be really great for salads. Maincrop potatoes tend to be better for roasting, with their larger tubers and more floury texture.

First Earlies - plant from late March onwards. Harvest June-July

Second Earlies - plant from early to mid-April. Harvest July-August

Main crop - plant mid- to late-April. Harvest late August or early September for winter storage and use.

Second or catch crop - plant in July into the ground where your Early potatoes have been dug, harvest at Christmas. Try this with e.g. Charlotte potatoes.

**Chitting** is the process of letting potatoes develop shoots, i.e. sprouting. This gives them a head-start before you put them in the ground and so enables your crop to be lifted earlier, avoiding slug damage, also avoiding blight in a wet year, or the driest period of a dry year. Against this, the total yield is slightly reduced.

If you don't want to chit, keep your seed potatoes at around 4°C.

To start the chitting process off, place your seed potatoes in a warm area with some light, in your house, a porch, shed or greenhouse. Temperatures above ten degrees are ideal. Place potatoes, with stalk down and eyes up' in egg boxes while chitting. (The 'stalk' is the original point of attachment of the potato to its parent plant). If you have many potatoes to chit, use a bed of scrumpled-up newspaper in seed trays.

After a while, the eyes of the potato will start to sprout green/purple knobbly shoots. (White shoots indicate that the seed potatoes are not receiving enough light.)

## PLANTING

Whilst potatoes will grow in practically any soil, they will do so much better if the soil is friable and is mixed with rotted organic matter such as farmyard manure.

Rotate your potato bed annually, to avoid developing a patch harbouring potato pests and diseases.

If your potatoes have more than about 3 shoots than this then it's a good idea to take off extras: this ensures that you will get bigger potatoes when they crop. If you don't remove the extra chits then your potato plant will produce more potatoes but they will be smaller because the energy and nutrients available will be split between the additional chits.

Plant potatoes, **eyes or sprouts up**, in rows, roughly 6" deep with rows spaced 24" apart (Earlies) and 30" apart (main crop). In each row, place each potatoes 12" apart (Earlies) and 15" apart (main crop). Cover over with soil; if your soil is clumpy, then first cover your seed potatoes with well-rotted manure or compost.

When planting potatoes in containers, fill the container to about a third with well-rotted manure and compost mixed together. Place the chitted potatoes on top and cover them with about four to six inches of compost or soil. Once the first shoots start to show, again cover up with the same amount of compost or soil - until the container is full, then leave to grow.

**Potatoes are very susceptible to frost.** In general it's advisable not to plant potatoes before the threat of frost has passed. Once the potatoes are growing above ground, if there is a threat of frost, then cover any greenery with fleece to protect the plants.

## **BLIGHT**

Potato late blight is a serious disease spread by fungal spores, particularly in wet weather. Potato leaves collapse, shrivel and turn brown; affected tubers have a reddish-brown decay below the skin, which develop into a soft rot. See separate information sheet on Potato and Tomato Blight.

## **HARVESTING**

**First and second earlies** tend to be ready to harvest as soon as the plant has stopped flowering. Take off the top of the plant and remove the potatoes you need, you can leave the rest in the compost for a period of about 4 weeks.

**Maincrop potatoes** are ready when the plant starts to wither and die away. Remove all of the potatoes and leave them in a dark frost-free area to dry out thoroughly before eating or storing.