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Growing Organic Potatoes

Preparing the Seeds

Greening or Chitting:

European market growers always pre-sprout their early potatoes for stronger, quicker stands and higher yields. This “greening” or “chitting” process is not necessary but is easy to do. Just spread the potatoes in open flats, seed end up. The seed end has the greatest concentration of eyes or growth buds and is the area where the strongest sprouts form. Expose the potatoes to moderate light and 60°F - 70°F for a week or two. Potatoes smaller than 2” can be planted whole. Larger potatoes are cut into 1-2 oz. pieces, each containing 2+ eyes. Dip the cut ends into dry wood ash to callous them or spread the pieces one layer deep, away from direct sun, for a day to cure. Do not allow pieces to shrivel. Callusing is especially important if you are planting into fairly damp or cold soil.

Preparing the Bed:

Potatoes prefer a pH range of about 5-7 and fertile, fairly weed-free soil. They prefer sandy loam but will grow in a wide variety of soil types if the soil is well cultivated and well drained. The soil should be at least 45°F when you plant. Potatoes are not heavy feeders but do require adequate nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus, magnesium, and calcium. **Home gardeners should fertilize as they would a vegetable garden.**

Important Note: High quality, is preferable to manure as a fertilizer. If you must fertilize with manure, be sure it is well-aged and that it is incorporated shallowly into the soil at least 3-4 weeks before planting, otherwise the process of soil digestion will deprive the germinating potatoes of vital nutrients and water. Do not fertilize with fresh manure, as this can cause scab. One of the best ways to prepare the ground for potatoes is to cover crop.

Planting & Growing:

Hoe a shallow furrow (3” wide and 3” deep). Gardeners can space the rows 20” to 26” apart, but farmers might want to make them 30” to 36” apart. Space potato seeds, eyes up, 12” apart in the rows, and immediately rake 3” of loose, fine soil over them. Do not plant any deeper than 3”. The new potatoes will grow above the seed piece, so “hilling up” is necessary to provide sufficient friable soil and to protect the new potatoes from sun exposure. About 2 weeks after planting, when the plant shoots are 4” to 5” high, rake a good mound of soil around them, leaving about 1” of shoot exposed. In 2 to 3 weeks, hill again if necessary, taking care not to damage the plant’s roots. Be certain to keep the soil moist; irrigate if necessary. Mulch thickly with straw if heavy frosts are a factor.

Another approach, valued for the clean, easy dig it provides, is to grow your potatoes in straw. Do not trench, just lay the seed on the loosened soil and cover it with 6" of straw. As sprouts appear, keep mulching with straw. You must provide enough mulch (10" to 12") to fully protect the new potato crop from sunlight. (Sunlight will green the potatoes, making them unfit to eat.) At harvest time, just pull back the mulch.

Harvesting:

Spring-planted, early varieties will be ready in about 50- 60 days. For maximum freshness, dig only what you can eat in 2 days. Do not eat green potatoes, as they contain the toxic alkaloid solanine. Later varieties, intended for winter storage, should be "matured." Let frost kill the vines, or kill them by scything, flaming or mowing them. Take care not to pull up the potatoes, which should stay in the ground 2 more weeks to "set the skins." After harvest, store at 36°F - 40°F in dark, well-ventilated conditions. High humidity (80% - 90%) is also important. Arrange the potatoes in small piles, to improve ventilation, and cover the piles with burlap sacks, newspapers, etc. to reduce spoilage caused by condensation.

People also like using containers or bags to grow potatoes. This is an effective method, and keeps potatoes from hogging up valuable garden space. To plant in a container, fill with 5 inches of good potting soil or planting mix, and recommend amounts of organic fertilizer according the package. Place potato pieces (about every 6 inches) and cover with another 4 inches of the same soil. After the potato begins to grow, backfill with soil and fertilizer to cover the stem, periodically.

