



Potatoes aplenty

Many varieties grow well in Oregon's climate and in flexible spaces

CHRIS RUSCH
Master Gardener

Question: What are your recommendations for growing potatoes in a limited space? What varieties would you recommend?

Answer: Potatoes came to North America from their origin in Peru. Potatoes are the fourth largest food crop in the world.

Potatoes are an excellent choice for the home garden. They emerge quickly and grow rapidly, yielding well under most soil and growing conditions. They can be stored for long periods without canning, drying or freezing. Potatoes are not only delicious but also highly nutritious. They are rich in starch, but an average-sized baked potato contains only 90 to 100 calories. Potato protein has a well-balanced complement of amino acids and is among the best to be found in vegetables. Tubers are a good source of trace minerals and several vitamins, including vitamin C.

Selecting the proper variety is important, since varieties differ in yield, cooking characteristics, time of maturity, skin and flesh color, and storage life. Varieties have been traditionally classed as white, red or russet, based on skin color or texture. Today many new varieties are available through catalogs and specialty producers.

The following varieties are satisfactory for Oregon home gardens. You may want to try more than one. Oregon State University recommends several varieties from the OSU vegetable research farm.

Colored potatoes have phytonutrients, a natural compound found in fruits and vegetables that promote good health. The yellow color is produced by carotenoids (pro vitamin A), and the red and purple potatoes produce anthocyanins. Some recommendations for yellow potatoes are: Yellow Finn, Yukon Gold, Bintje, Carola, Desiree and Red Gold.

Fingerling potatoes are small in size but big in flavor. OSU recommends All Blue as performing well in Oregon. OSU-recommended red potatoes include Red Pontiac, Norland and Red Gold. Recommended white potatoes are Russet Burbank, Superior, Gold Rush and Kennebec. While the leading U.S. variety, Russet Burbank, is excellent for frying and baking, it is often inferior to Kennebec or Red Pontiac for boiling.

Consider the time span from planting to maturity when selecting a variety. Norland, for example may mature in 80 to 90 days, compared

with 120 days or more for Russet Burbank. Early maturing varieties are a better choice for “new” potatoes, but late-maturing varieties store better because they resist sprouting and shriveling in storage.

Potatoes do best on fertile, well-drained soils. Work the soil to a depth of 6 to 8 inches before planting. The seed bed does not have to be perfectly smooth as is required for small seeded crops. Excessive tillage can actually cause the soil to seal over after heavy rains, leading to rotting of the potatoes seed pieces.

Potato plants require a complete fertilizer for best growth. This would be approximately equal parts of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Materials such as 10-10-10 satisfy this requirement and are widely available from most garden centers. Fertilizers normally are applied at or shortly before planting either by broadcast or band applications or a combination. Many gardeners hand broadcast the entire amount and work it into the top 3 to 4 inches of soil by raking or tilling. A more effective but time consuming method is to place all or part of the fertilizer in a band 3 inches to the side and 1 inch below the seed pieces. A combination of broadcasting half and banding half of the fertilizer usually is more effective than either method alone. Never place fertilizer on or directly above the seed pieces as this could dehydrate or damage the seed pieces.

Potatoes are traditionally grown from seed pieces. These are not true “seed” but pieces of a potato tuber. Do not use potatoes purchased at the grocery store for seed pieces as they are probably treated to not sprout. Buy certified seed potatoes from a reputable seed seller. Buying certified seed potatoes assures varietal purity and a level of disease resistance.

Potatoes can be planted from March until mid-June. Due to our wet weather this year, it is probably best to wait until late April or early May.

If you do not have much space, potatoes can be grown successfully in containers or a raised bed. Potatoes should be planted about 4 inches deep. Fill the container with about 6 inches of potting soil. Space seed potatoes 6 inches apart. Cover them with another 4 inches of potting soil. Add a couple of handfuls of fertilizer and mix it well into the soil. Don't fill the pot up to the top yet. Leave 3 to 4 inches to the rim of the pot. Water them in well and keep the soil slightly moist all the times (not wet!). Fill up the pot with more soil once the plants start growing. Once your potatoes



PIXABY.COM PHOTOS

Potatoes can be grown in small spaces, including containers, top, and pots, above.

have grown to about an inch over the rim, fill the pot up with more potting soil. In a raised bed or garden setting, seed potatoes can be spaced 10 to 12 inches apart in furrows 4 inches deep. As the plants emerge, it is a good idea to mound straw or soil around the plants. Avoid covering the leaves.

Potato tubers turn green in the sunlight. The green color is chlorophyll and is not poisonous. However, solanine, a poisonous alkaloid, increases along with the chlorophyll. Therefore, green potatoes could be toxic if eaten in large quantities. To prevent greening, keep the tubers covered with soil or straw as they emerge.

Potatoes should be watered regularly throughout the summer. On average, from 1 to 3 inches per week is recommended. Water potatoes in midday to allow the foliage to dry before nightfall. Dew and high relative humidity during the night and early morning may cause the leaves to remain wet and highly susceptible to infection by late blight and other fungal and bacterial diseases. An even, adequate soil moisture supply favors the best yield and healthy plants.

Reduce irrigation late in the season and cease watering when the vines begin to die. Many varieties die-down on their own to let you know they are ready to harvest. If the plants are still growing and your potatoes have reached the perfect size, you can stop growth by cutting off the plant foliage. Potatoes should be left in the ground for about two weeks after the vines have died. This allows the skins to set and increases the storage ability. Store potatoes in a relatively dry location and at a low temperature without freezing.

For young or “new” potatoes, check your plants periodically for tuber development. Small potatoes can be harvested as soon as they develop. Do not attempt to store immature potatoes for more than a few days.

Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call or visit the Douglas County Master Gardeners Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-236-3052 or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.