

## SEED POTATOES

**Of all the vegetables grown in British gardens the potato is perhaps the most ubiquitous. Easy to grow and very rewarding, everybody can find a variety (or three) to suit their needs. Credit for their introduction to this country is given to Sir Walter Raleigh – builder of Sherborne Castle and in whose walled garden Castle Gardens now exists.**

**Potatoes are well suited to new gardeners and are often planted as the first crop in new ground to help improve it whilst the dense foliage suppresses many of the weeds that would otherwise spring up from the seed bank.**

### **Growing**

#### **Soil**

Choose an open, well-drained frost-free site. Prepare the ground, if possible in the autumn by digging plenty of organic matter to a depth of about 2ft or 60 cm. A general fertilizer may be added just prior to planting, such as Growmore.

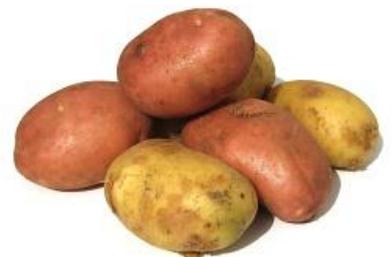
#### **Choosing varieties**

If you have enough space in the vegetable plot it is worth growing varieties from all three groups of potato – the first earlies, the second earlies and the maincrops. This allows you to spread out the harvest dates of your crop and also spreads your bet in case of pest or disease problems such as blight. With less space, it is a popular choice to grow a row of first earlies to get those wonderful new potatoes on the dinner table as early in the year as possible alongside a larger area of maincrop potatoes. If you have very little space read on to find out about growing potatoes in pots!

Let us help you with your choice – a description of the varieties we have in stock, alongside some suggestions as to which ones are best for different purposes such as mashing or roasting, is available from the plant lists section of our website under the 'Shopping' tab.

#### **Chitting**

Set out your seed potatoes, eyes uppermost, in egg boxes or wooden trays to chit. Keep them in a light but not sunny position in a well ventilated frost free room. The tubers will develop several sprouts 15-25mm or 1/2 to 1 inch long within about 6 weeks. For larger early potatoes leave only 3 sprouts per tuber, rubbing off the rest. Otherwise the more sprouts per tuber, the higher the yield.



## **PLANTING**

### **First Earlies**

Plant out in mid March, 30cm or 12" apart, and 45cm, 18" between rows and 10-15cm or 4-6 inches deep. Harvest June/July.

### **Second Earlies**

Plant out with the same spacing from early April and harvest in July/August.

### **Maincrop**

Plant out 15" apart with 27" between rows (this allows extra space for the tubers to mature) from late April and harvest in August, September and October.

## **EARTHING UP**

Potatoes need to be 'earthed up' (drawing a mound of soil over them) to prevent those tubers near the surface from turning green and making them unpalatable and sometimes even toxic. This also protects the green leaves from any late frosts.

## **Potatoes in Pots**

Harvesting your own potatoes is very satisfying, discovering the hidden treasures that lie beneath the soil. But what if you haven't the space for a vegetable garden? Why not try a few tubers in a container. Use a pot that is approximately 18 inches deep and wide. Place 3 tubers in fresh compost about half way down, keep well watered and away from frosts. They will be ready to harvest in a few months time. Try to pick a variety with shorter foliage such as Swift. It's that easy so go on have a go.

***Top Tip - save some tubers and repeat the process in September in the greenhouse for new potatoes on **Christmas Day.*****

## **Harvesting**

When are your potatoes ready to harvest?

First earlies are best enjoyed when they are small and fresh in June/July/August and second earlies follow on. Carefully scrape away some soil to see if they have reached the size you want before you decide to dig.

Maincrop varieties are better left until October to develop to a good size. Once the foliage has died back leave maincrop potatoes in the ground for 2-3 weeks to allow the skins to 'set' before storing.

As a guideline, expect earlies to take 65 – 100 days from planting, second earlies to take 100 – 130 days and maincrop to take 125 – 180 days. The weather, your planting date and which part of the country you are in will all affect how soon your crop is ready.

To lift your potatoes, insert a garden fork (or even better a proper potato fork with broad, rounded tines that will not pierce your potatoes) into the ground not far from the base of the plant. As you turn over the forkful of soil your potatoes should be revealed!



## **STORING**

Moist or wet potatoes will not keep so choose a dry day to harvest and let leave them on the surface of the soil for a few hours to dry off. Some varieties – usually maincrop varieties will stay dormant until the following spring and can be left in the ground until required if you prefer.

Pack your crop into breathable bags – preferably hessian sacks – and keep these in a dark, airy and cool but frost-free environment.