

Potato Time?

“Always plant your potatoes on Good Friday.” My grandmother established Good Friday as the start of the family gardening season. I clearly remember fumbling with a pocket knife cutting seed potatoes and walking long rows with cold-numb fingers dropping tubers “eye up”. We did not always plant on Good Friday, and you don’t have to either.

Potatoes are native to the Andes Mountains of southern Peru. Spanish conquistadors exported the novel plant back to Europe in the 16th Century where they viewed it as an oddity and ornamental plant, rather than a vegetable. The humble potato gradually made its way to the British Isles finding favor with small holders and landless tenants. The potatoes unrivaled production coupled with its nutrient-dense and flavorful composition fueled its adoption across Europe. In Ireland before the Potato Famine of the 1840’s where one million people perished of disease and starvation and several hundred thousand were forced to immigrate, potatoes supplied 80% of the populations caloric intake.

“Boil ‘em, mash ‘em, stick ‘em in a stew,”¹ potatoes are a regional staple. Worried you may not see the beloved potato on your table if you don’t plant on Good Friday? Fear not, you have plenty of time. Potatoes germinate best when planted in well-drained soil that is 50 degrees or higher. With all the rain Johnson County has experienced recently there is a good chance your soil is both under 50 degrees and too wet for good germination. Locating seed potatoes is also a concern. The average person in the U.S. consumes 110 pounds a year, but remember that counts French fries and potato chips! A good rule of thumb is 14 pounds of seed potatoes plant a 100-foot row. A single row with proper fertilization and care can potentially yield 100 pounds or more. That is a lot of potatoes, consider your diet and storage capacity before purchasing seed and perhaps you can share with a neighbor.

Enjoy Easter weekend and do not worry if your garden is cold and muddy. One option that may scratch your planting itch is building a raised bed or planting potatoes in a large planter or container. That may not be the way granny did it, but at least you will be upholding tradition and enjoying potatoes sooner than your neighbors.

1. Samwise Gamgee to Smeagol, *The Two Towers*. Tolkien.