

Potato Planting Tips

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Did you plant potatoes April 15th? Good Friday potato planting traditions go back a long way, perhaps as far as the 1600's in Europe and Catholic Ireland. And while the origins are a bit fuzzy, old timers and tradition bearers continue to hold fast. And why not? Some traditions just work. However, the tricky thing about this custom is the way Easter moves every year. Next year it falls on April 9th while March 31st is Easter Sunday 2024. It always slips up on me and our garden is rarely ready. We did plant a handful of blue potatoes in a raised bed on Good Friday, but the tater patch is empty. If you did not set spuds on Good Friday don't worry, there is still plenty of time.

Potatoes prefer cooler weather, withstanding light frosts with ease and preferring air temperatures in the 50-60-degree range for optimum growth. However, paying attention to soil temperature is better than the calendar for planning your potato planting party. Never plant potatoes until the soil at planting depth is consistently 45-50 degrees. Planting into cold, wet, heavy soil increases the possibility seed tubers will rot while planting into cool, dry soil delays sprouting. Well-drained sandy and sandy loam soils are best, but potatoes tolerate a range of types. Adding organic matter in the form of compost, cover crops and well-rotted manure enriches the soil while improving its structure, nutrient holding capacity, and drainage, something commercial fertilizer cannot do.

Unlike most garden vegetables potatoes perform best in slightly acidic soil. PH levels in the 4.8-5.5 pH range are ideal but maintaining a pH of 6.5 is a good compromise. Scab issues increase as pH rises, so selecting resistant types is recommended.

Cut side up or down? Down, with 'eyes' or buds up. Think of the eyes as sprouts – reaching upward for light wanting to mature into a full-grown plant. Cut seed potatoes into egg-sized chunks ensuring each piece has two or more eyes. No slivers or slabs which often lack adequate sugar reserves needed for growth. Cut seed potatoes 2-7 days before planting and place in a high humidity environment for curing. The curing period encourages the cut to “heal over,” forming a protective layer and reducing the possibility of rotting after planting. A light dusting of elemental sulfur helps too and may address pH issues as sulfur pushes pH down.

Go ahead and get those spuds in the ground, you will be feasting on new potatoes in a couple months. And make plans to join UT/TSU Extension for a “Storing the Harvest” workshop July 21. We'll be discussing canning, dehydrating, storing root vegetables, and more. Details will be available soon. I'm off to plant potatoes!