

Growing Your Seed Potatoes

On receiving your seed potatoes, you will need to chit them. Chitting means sprouting each tuber. Place it with most eyes upright, in a light (not sunny), cool but frost-free place, at about 10°C – a garage or porch, slightly warmed by the house, is ideal. Light is important so don't shove them off at the back of a shed. If you only have a few tubers, line them up in egg cartons. If you're doing lots, put the tubers in shallow, open boxes, like the slatted-bottomed ones you get at the greengrocers. Divide this up with sections of folded newspaper to keep the tubers upright and slot them in.

Chitting ensures a quicker and slightly larger harvest. With early varieties it gets them off to a flying start, so we can begin the harvest by the end of June, and we now chit blight-prone Maincrop potatoes like the very tasty 'Pink Fir Apple'. With this variety, it makes them grow faster and form larger tubers once planted out, so we can get in a crop in August or early September, before the worst of the blight takes hold.

Keep an eye on your potatoes whilst they chit and wait for strong, short green shoots to appear (4-6 weeks) about 2-3cm (1in) long from the eyes of each tuber. You don't want the white, spaghetti-like things you get when potatoes are kept in the dark in a cupboard, but stout green and pink things. If you want to maximize the size of your potatoes, rub off all but three or four at the top end of the tuber before planting out. If you leave all the shoots intact, you'll end up with lots of small ones. It's up to you to decide.

First earlies *'Winston'*

Second earlies *'Anya', 'Charlotte', 'International Kidney', 'Nicola', 'Ratte'*

Plant in mid March in the south, a few weeks later in the north. Earlies need to be planted 12-15cm (5-6in) deep, and spaced at 30cm (12in) between each potato along the row and 60cm (24in) between the rows.

As the leaves emerge, use a rake to cover with soil along the row – this protects the young leaves from frost. When the plants are about 10cm (4in) high they need proper 'earthing up'. This means piling the soil from around the plant up over the plants to form a ridge along the row, and will stop them going green. Harvest the Earlies when the flowers have opened, or the buds have dropped off. This will be in June/July.

Maincrops *'Belle de Fontenay', 'Pink Fir Apple'*

For Maincrop potatoes, plant them about a month later, in April or even May to get a good cropping succession after the Earlies. Maincrops tend to be less hardy too.

The same planting advice applies with Maincrops as for Earlies, with the exception of the planting distances along the rows. Maincrops make bigger plants, so plant the tubers 40cm apart with 75cm between the rows. And lift the potatoes only when the foliage starts to die down, but make sure all the tubers are lifted before the onset of frost.

Forcing Potatoes in bags

If you can get yourself organised, it's good to force some potatoes to give you an early crop to eat in May and June before the outdoor-grown crop is ready. I use 'International Kidney' and 'Belle de Fontenay' for forcing.

Use an inside-out compost bag or extra thick bin liners. Inside out, the bags are black and absorb any heat going. Roll down the sides of the compost bags to about half their height, make a few holes in the bottom of the plastic for drainage.

Plant 2 tubers a bag, in the greenhouse in February or March, without bothering to chit. Fill the bag to about 30cm (12in) deep. Use one-third molehills (or a soil based compost such as John Innes No. 2) and two-thirds compost. Earth from molehills will give you lovely crumbly loam where the moles have done lots of the hard work for you – they create the most delicious, friable, grass-free soil from a depth usually below the worst of the weed seed. Avoid mushroom compost, as the lime in it promotes the proliferation of scab.

Put in two tubers per bag and bury them in the soil/compost mix, then back fill another 15cm (6in) or so on top. Water them in well. Put your sacks somewhere bright, frost free and a little warm. Within 3 weeks or so, they will have begun to shoot. Keep the compost damp, but not sopping wet. Once the shoots are about 15cm (6in), roll up the edges of the bag a few turns and fill up with more soil/compost mix. Carry on earthing them up, bit by bit every couple of weeks, until they reach nearly the top of the bag. In May, allow the shoots to come up to flower, then you can start to harvest.

If you have lots of people coming to eat at once, turn out one whole bag at a time. But new potatoes are always at their tastiest and sweetest if they are freshly harvested, so if it's just for a couple of you, cut a hole in the corner of a bag and then 'milk' your potatoes – put your hands up into the compost and harvest the number you want just for that meal. Water them after your harvest and leave the haulms (leaves and stalks) to grow on until next time.