

healthy HOME



Properly Planted Potatoes

I've had many years of trial and error in the potato- growing department and, let me tell you, growing edible potatoes takes a specific art. To be honest, growing potatoes are more difficult than growing most other vegetables, but, rest assured, there is nothing too complex involved for you, or anyone else, gardener or not, to master.

In this workshop I'll share my proven tips and helpful guidelines, provide you with a "what and what not to do" list, and finish off with my exact outdoor potato planting routine. And, for those of you still dealing with a few inches of snow, I'll share my winter weather indoor potato tower routine - to make your days of "paltry potatoes" a thing of the past. Get ready for some hands-on country girl learning and get prepared for your best crop of hearty and tasty potatoes yet.

Let's talk potato basics, growing tips, and guidelines...

The good thing about growing potatoes is that they are pretty darn resilient. They'll grow in just about any condition, but they'll absolutely thrive in acidic soil with a pH ranging from 4.5 to about 6.0. PH stands for "potential hydrogen" and is measured on an easy to read scale. There are three tiers to the pH scale: acidic, which is 1-6, neutral, which is right in the middle around 7, and alkaline, which is anything above 7. A perfectly balanced pH, along with a few other variables, is essential for healthy and robust potatoes.

In most regions of the US, the soil tends to be more alkaline than acidic, so one of the most important steps in growing a great crop of potatoes is to add lots of nutrient rich compost, blended with oak leaves, sawdust, or pine needles, to the garden area. Although natural vegetarian manure is a good thing for most crops, it's not good for potatoes. Manure creates a more neutral to alkaline pH, so don't add any manure to your potato beds - but, do add manure to the soil after your potato crop is harvested and when you're rotating your gardening areas. Manure helps to replenish the earth and revive used soil. Also, after harvest, when you add the manure, add lime to the soil too. Lime, like manure, increases pH and helps to renew soil for future crops.

If you already have a working garden and have harvested a few crops, reserve the areas where your peas and beans were planted for your future potatoes. Both peas and beans leave a wonderful nitrogen rich deposit in the soil that will improve the growth of your potatoes. If you grew other nightshades, like tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant, don't plant your potatoes in their beds. The soil will be undernourished and deplete of the nitrogen potatoes depend on for optimal growth.

Potatoes thrive when planted in deep holes or trenches covered with many layers of loose airy soil. The roots and shoots of developing potatoes require plenty of space to shoot and grow comfortably through the soil. Clay and heavy earth tend to stunt potato growth and result in tiny potatoes and low yields. Although it might sound too deep, always make sure to create holes and trenches that are at least ten to twelve inches deep.

Seed potatoes are most commonly used to grow new potatoes. They are kept in dark dry environment with a constant temperature of 60 degrees and are available at most garden and feed stores. The special conditions in which the seed potatoes are kept accelerate the production of eyes and shoots, which produce new potato plants and feed the tubers and potatoes growing beneath the soil. If you don't have seed potatoes but have a bounty of cooking potatoes with multiple eyes and active shoots, feel free to use these guys for planting too.

If your seedling potatoes or kitchen potatoes have developed at least three eyes and a few shoots, but are very small, use the entire potato as the seed. If you have larger potatoes, with many eyes and shoots, you can cut them into segments and use each segment as a seedling potato. Do this if and only if each segment has at least three eyes and at three shoots. If you happen to have a seed potato without any eyes or shoots, toss it into your compost – don't use it as a seed potato.

After I cut my seed potatoes into segments, I like to bathe them in sulphur powder and add a little sulphur powder to their holes before I cover them up with soil. The sulphur powder, which can be purchased at feed stores or garden supply stores, protects the seed potatoes from disease and seems to boost their underground growing power. This is a cheap and effective gardener's hack, and a little bit of the powder goes a very long way. Of course, always read the handling directions and wear gloves and eye protection. Wash your hands after use and maybe have the kiddos pass this step - sulphur powder can cause serious chemical burns.

Lastly, only plant potatoes when the earth has reached 60 degrees or above and only when the earth is moist, but not saturated. If the earth is saturated, the seed potatoes will rot and die. Potatoes definitely take plenty of moisture to grow and thrive, but, like all crops, too much water is never a good thing. Also, if you want to get creative and grow potatoes of varying sizes, like large baking potatoes and small creamer potatoes, dig holes with varying widths. For larger potatoes create holes that are further apart from one another and for smaller potatoes create holes that are closer to one another. And, when the potato plants start to grow and bloom, don't rake the areas. Gently cover the base of the plant with loose soil and allow the delicate plant to do as nature intended – grow. If you rake the areas or hill around in the soil, you'll potentially break the new shoots and destroy the plant.

One more thing, sometimes I add a bit of bone meal, for added nutrients and for a heartier yield, to the holes and trenches before I cover them up with soil. I only do this if the soil is a bit undernourished and if I have the bone meal on hand.

Quick Overview... What and What Not To Do For An Amazing Yield:

- Always prepare and nourish your soil.
- Always test the soil's pH and add compost to adjust.
- Keep your seed potatoes in dark and dry area and segment according to the number of eyes and

shoots.

- Plant only one seed potato per hole. Planting multiple seedlings per hole produces competition and low yield.
- Bathe your segments in sulphur powder and add sulphur powder and bone meal to the planting holes before covering with soil.
- Create planting holes with varying widths to produce large baking potatoes (larger spacing) and small creamer potatoes (smaller spacing).
- Don't over water.
- Don't rake the soil after shoots appear – this can cause the shoots to break.

Jessa's Outdoor Potato Planting and Indoor Potato Tower Planting Routine:

First, I always sit down with a sketchbook and list everything I need for successful planting in the garden or in the garage on the potato tower and draft a layout of how and where I'll be planting my potatoes. Given there are many varieties of potato, I like to plant a few different species in the garden and in my indoor tower. In my layout design, I place the earliest harvesting potatoes in the front of my potato bed, or in the front of the tower, followed by later blooming varieties - moving from front to middle to back - this makes it easy to harvest the early bloomers without causing any unenecessary disturbances to the late bloomers. I also jot down my desired hole widths to ensure a yield of all shapes and sizes of each variety of potato. I always find myself preparing recipes calling for both large and small potatoes and, with my spacing system, I always have plenty of all sizes and shapes. Remember, differing sized potatoes create different tastes and textures. After I've decided on what and where to plant, I test my soil, add fertilizer, till and hill the earth, and check for adequate moisture and airiness. I tweak the soil with added nutrients and, when the pH, temperature, and moisture are close to perfect, I dig my deep holes and trenches. I then add a bit of sulphur powder and maybe some bone meal to the prepared holes. When I plant vertically, using my potato towers, the only thing that differs from planting in my garden is that I don't have to dig trenches. You'll see exactly what I mean when you watch this months tutorial video.

Next, I prepare my seed potatoes for planting. I cut segments, place the segments in a large bag, add sulphur powder, seal the bag, and shake until their eyes and shoots are coated. Again, I always wear gloves, eye protection, and wash my hands after using the sulphur powder – it will cause burns if you are not careful. Be careful!

When I plant the bathed segments into the prepared holes, I make sure that the shoots are pointing towards the sky. Always make sure of this – our goal is to have the shoots grow towards the sky, not towards the earth. Doing so makes the initial stages of growth easy on the plant.

After my segments are properly positioned in their holes, I might sprinkle a tad more bone meal and then loosely cover the holes and trenches with soil. Layer by layer, until I have beautiful mounds.

If the earth was moist to begin with, I will gently water for the next few days and increase the moisture from there on.

For the next weeks I'll check on my plants daily, water and nourish as needed, and patiently wait for the plant to flower and for the flowers to die. Only after the large potato plants have flowered and the

flowers have died are the potatoes ready for harvest.

When I notice my earliest bloomers are ready for harvest, the boys and I will head out and gently dig up our bounty while leaving our later blooming potatoes undisturbed. We continue this process until our entire bed of varying potatoes are ready for harvest and then we immediately replenish the soil and allow the beds to rest for a future crop rotation.

I store my yield in my root cellar where they'll be perfectly kept, ready for all my culinary creations, for many months to come.

That, my friend, is the farm-girl proven way to properly plant potatoes in the garden and in an indoor, vertical growing, potato tower. Happy planting and enjoy your potatoes!