PLANT LIFE COLUMN

THE POTATO

Do your children wonder what a French fry plant looks like? Have you ever thought of growing your own mashed potatoes? If you have a little space in full sun, you can plant a plot of potatoes.

Potatoes are easy to grow vegetables for a bountiful harvest in a small space. Plant in January or February and you'll be ready for soup, casseroles, fries and hash browns by late April or May.

Potato plants have roots that grow in the ground but the part that we eat is technically a tuber. Tubers are modified, underground stems complete with buds called eyes. Like above ground stems, the buds have the ability to produce new shoots and roots and grow into additional plants. We plant "seed" potato pieces (cut pieces with eyes) to start potatoes growing in the garden.

Fall planting is acceptable as early as October if it doesn't freeze mid-winter and kill the plants during prime tuber production time. By delaying planting until January or February, the young tender shoots that emerge are small enough to cover when cold nights are predicted.

Florida growers produce potatoes commercially for chips and for other cooking uses. The varieties commercial growers want are market dependent. The types for home gardeners depend on what is available through local garden centers and feed stores. Atlantic is a brown skin type that is resistant to a variety of diseases. Superior and Sebago are similar but without the strong disease tolerance. Red Pontiac, La Rouge and Red LaSoda are red skin favorites.

To prepare potato "seeds", cut the potatoes into pieces about 2 ounces each being sure each piece has an indented eye area. Avoid using unsprouted table potatoes for seed since they are usually treated with sprout inhibitors to prevent them from sprouting during storage. Packaged seeds are available, but they yield less per plant than if grown from cut potato seed pieces.

Allow cut pieces to dry for a day or two to prevent rotting. Some gardeners prefer to treat the cut pieces with an approved garden fungicide and plant right away. Always read and follow label directions. Plant seed potato pieces 3" to 4" deep. It takes about 15 pounds of potatoes to plant a 100 foot row or 100 square foot bed. Commercial farmers plant in rows 3' to 4' apart for easy tractor cultivation but home gardeners can stagger plantings 6" to 12" apart in wide rows.

Try planting 3 or 4 pieces in a 5 gallon bucket of soil. Some gardeners start potatoes in soil and then mound straw on top as the plants grow. The tubers form above the soil in the straw and clean potatoes are easy to harvest. Many a gardener has grown potatoes from potato peelings (with eyes) thrown on top of the compost pile or from discarded old sprouted potatoes from the pantry.

Fertilize like other vegetables using an analysis such as an 8-2-8 containing nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Apply fertilizer sparingly, using about two pounds per 100 square feet of planting area at planting time and then re-apply after plants have been growing a month or so using about one pound of fertilizer per 100 square feet.

Avoid over-watering which causes disease. Keep soil moist but not soggy. Reduce watering during the last few weeks of growth.

As the potatoes grow, the soil will begin to crack at the base of the plant. Pull soil over the enlarging tubers to prevent them from turning green and sprouting in the garden. Tubers are ready to harvest in 85 to 110 days after planting, but small potatoes can be dug any time. Test the size by pulling soil away from the base of the plant and feeling for the enlarged tubers. If they are too small, simply re-cover them with soil.
It is beneficial to cut the tops off about 2 weeks before harvest to toughen the skin and prevent damage to the tubers. Expect about 150 pounds of potatoes from a 100 feet of row.

As we have moved away from farms, many children have missed the experience of home grown produce. Potatoes are an easy addition to the garden or landscape. Try growing some at home and show your family that French fries don't grow on trees!

Teachers can use the new Ag in the Classroom curriculum to help students learn about many different agricultural commodities and how they are produced on farms, processed and marketed to consumers. The interdisciplinary approach targets many of the Sunshine State Standards.

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