HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

THE POTATO

Have you noticed potatoes falling out of the trees lately? These are not really potatoes to eat, but a weedy relative of the yam called air potato. The plants are native to Asia and Africa, but have decided they like living here quite well. The vigorous heart leafed vines can be seen blanketing trees and fences around the county throughout the warmer months.

Air potatoes produce an above ground tuber as a way to reproduce. When cold weather kills the leafy vines, the potato like structures which range from the size of a pea to the size of a grapefruit fall to the ground.

You want to remove this invasive vine and all the potatoes to stop the spread. This is a fun activity for the kids, like a winter egg hunt.

If you want to grow potatoes to eat, plant a plot of real edible white potatoes. They are easy to grow vegetables for a bountiful harvest in a small space. Plant this month 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.

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 inches 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 feet apart for easy tractor cultivation but home gardeners can stagger plantings 6 to 12 inches 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 up 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 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!

Want to learn more about growing vegetables? Call our UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension office at 321-697-3000. If you are interested in selling some of your excess produce, contact Jessica Sullivan or Randy Bateman at the same number.

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