

## Grow Your Own Potatoes in Any Space

By: Dr. Denise DeBusk, Environmental & Community Horticulture Agent

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French-fried, chipped, baked, or scalloped, the potato is one of America's most popular vegetables with Americans eating an average of 125 pounds of potatoes yearly per person. Have you ever heard that food tastes better if you grow it yourself? It really does because it has not been sitting in storage or on a grocery shelf for months. You also appreciate the food more. If you have never grown vegetables, potatoes are an easy way to start. Potatoes can be grown in a small space or in traditional rows with a few special considerations to increase your success. February is a great time to plant potatoes.



First, you need to pick your spot. Potatoes need full sun conditions with six to eight hours of light. You can plant potatoes in the ground, but you can also plant them in containers and place them on a deck, patio, or outside your kitchen window if you have enough sun. They can be grown in a garbage can or 5-gallon bucket with holes drilled on the bottom or in burlap bags. Another interesting method to grow potatoes is in a chicken wire and straw tower.

Next you need to prepare your soil. Potatoes need loose, well-drained, slightly acidic soil (pH 5-6) to thrive. It might be a good time to get a soil test if you haven't done so. If you are container gardening, you can use a mix of one third each of compost, peat moss, and vermiculite, or a good potting soil, to meet the right conditions. When growing in the ground, the area needs to be at least ten to twelve inches above the level of the soil. This can be accomplished through mounding or constructing a double high bed if you are doing square foot gardening.

Potato plants require adequate nutrition supplied throughout the growing season. A soil test can provide you the best recommendations if you are planting them in the ground. Half of the fertilizer should be applied at planting and the remainder applied 3-4 weeks after when they are 6-8 inches tall. For container gardening, mix a vegetable-type fertilizer into the soil applied 3 to 4 weeks apart according to the package directions.

One of the most important elements is seed piece preparation. Only certified seed potatoes should be planted in the home garden because store-bought potatoes may have diseases or been treated with a sprout inhibitor. Seed potatoes can be purchased at "seed and feed" stores, home improvement stores, and catalogs. The best varieties for north central Florida include the white-skinned potatoes 'LaChipper', 'Sebago', and 'Yukon Gold' and the red-skinned

potatoes 'Red LaSoda'. You can also try some exotic potatoes like the blue/purple flesh varieties and fingerling types. Cut the pieces into 2-inch sections with at least one or two eyes (look like dimples) per seed. The tuber needs to "heal" before planting to prevent rot so leave them in a cool, dark, well-ventilated place for 1 or 2 days.

Plant the seed pieces immediately after the healing process. They should be spaced about 6-8 inches apart with the eyes facing up (cut side down). Plant the seed pieces 4 inches below the soil. As the sprouts emerge, soil or straw should be "hilled" on the plants so there is room for the tubers. The tubers will turn green and be inedible if exposed to the sun. Make sure that the potato plants stay moist but not wet. Too much water can promote rot or diseases.

Most potatoes are ready for harvest 80 to 115 days after planting. If you plan on storing the potatoes, allow the plant to die or mature before harvest. You can speed this up by cutting the top of the plants off. Harvest your bounty approximately 2-3 weeks after the plant has died or tops removed. Dig carefully so you don't damage the tubers. Storing the potatoes in a cool, dark, well-ventilated area for 10-14 days will allow the cuts and bruises to heal. For more information, check out the University of Florida EDIS guide "Growing Potatoes in the Florida Home Garden," <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hs183>.

*Dr. Denise DeBusk is the Environmental and Community Horticulture Extension Agent for UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County. She can be contacted at [ddebusk@ufl.edu](mailto:ddebusk@ufl.edu) or (352) 955-2402.*