

Planting

Plant transplants from a garden center or seed catalog. Sweet potatoes from the grocery store may not sprout and can carry disease. Plant 12 - 18 inches apart in rows 3 feet apart.

Harvest and Storage

- Dig on a warm, sunny day after the first light frost. Do not damage them when digging. Bruised tubers deteriorate rapidly.
- Let them dry and brush off soil before storing.
- Leave in a warm (80 degrees F) room with good air circulation for 2 - 3 weeks.
- Store at 55 - 60 degrees F in a dark, cool and dry place. Check often and removed spoiled or rotten sweet potatoes.

For more information and other helpful educational materials, contact:

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Green Tips

Plant and Grow Guides

Potatoes and Sweet Potatoes (GT 114)

POTATOES

Potatoes can be grown successfully in Michigan gardens but require some work and a lot of space. Potatoes are swollen underground stems called tubers. They have buds or “eyes” on them. They grow well during cool weather but frost can damage sprouts. The only portion of the potato plant that is edible is the tubers. Potatoes are a cool season crop.



Potato varieties can be divided by skin color, flesh color, shape, intended use, disease resistance, and maturity dates.

Skin colors are russet, red, white, yellow and blue or purple. Flesh colors include white, yellow and blue. Intended use for potatoes: baking, boiling, mashing, frying, canning, French fries and chipping. This may be the most important part for some gardeners.

Soil- Plant in well drained, well-cultivated soil. A sandy loam is best. The best soil for potatoes is acidic with a soil pH of 5.5 - 6.0. The occurrence of potato scab increases when the pH is above 6.0 and manure or lime has been added the same year as the potatoes were planted. Heavy soils that do not drain well may produce tubers that are poorly shaped. Very sandy soils will need supplemental water to form good sized tubers.

Fertilizer- Follow your soil test recommendations or work in 2 pounds of 12-12-12 per 50 feet of row. One week after plants emerge from the ground, apply 5 ounces of 46-0-0 (urea) per 50 feet of row. Water in immediately.

Water- Potatoes do best with a consistent soil moisture level. Alternate periods of wet and dry can cause a hollow center in regular potatoes or split, knobby and misshapen tubers. One inch of water is required a week, which includes natural rainfall. Sandy soil may need more because the soil drains rapidly.

Planting- Plant potatoes when the soil temperature reaches 45 degrees at a depth of 6 inches. Planting when the soil is too cold can result in seed piece decay, drying of pieces or slow emergence of plants.

- Use “seed potatoes” (small potatoes or pieces of large ones with one or more eyes each.). Buy them from garden stores, farmers’ markets or seed catalogs. Buy certified seed potatoes to avoid disease.
- Do not plant potatoes from the grocery store. They may have been treated to stop sprouting or may carry disease.
- Small potatoes are ready to plant. Cut large ones into pieces with or more eyes in each piece. Store in a cool place for approximately 5 days so cuts dry.
- Plant 4 inches deep, 9 - 12 inches apart in a row. Leave 2 - 3 feet between rows.
- Cover with 2 inches of soil. After they sprout, add 2 more inches of soil - 4 inches in all.
- Do not plant if soil is very wet or hot and dry.
- If any tubers show above ground, cover with soil.

Weeding

- Keep weeds pulled but pull them when they are small. Be careful not to injure the potato’s shallow roots.
- Stop cultivation when the blossoms form. Cut weeds off at ground level after that.
- Mulching will save work, keep in moisture and prevent exposed potatoes from turning green.

When to harvest- Time of maturity varies with the variety. Indicators that the potatoes are ready to harvest include death of the vine, the skin does not peel from the flesh when pressure is applied and the tubers are the desired size. If long-term storage is the goal, wait until the tubers are fully mature. They will store longer and will have less bruising. Be sure to cut off any portions of the potato that are green before eating. Consuming the green portion is bitter and poisonous.

“New” potatoes- some people like to harvest some of the potatoes before maturity. Carefully dig down into the soil and remove a few potatoes while leaving the plant and roots undisturbed. These new potatoes are intended for immediate use.

How to harvest

- You can dig new potatoes when vines begin flowering.
- This reduces the ultimate yield.
- Dig mature potatoes before a severe frost.
- Dig potatoes with a potato fork or shovel. Be careful not to cut or bruise the potatoes.

Storage

- Lightly rinse off excess soil and allow them to dry quickly.
- Potatoes must be dry before storage. So not dry them in the sun because they will begin to turn green or sunburn.
- Store only unblemished potatoes. Use cut, bruised or damaged ones immediately.
- Store in the dark at about 55 to 60 degrees F and high humidity. If it is much warmer, they will sprout. If stored below 35 degrees F, they may become sweet.
- Do not store in unventilated plastic bags. Check for rotten potatoes once a week.

Sweet Potatoes

This crop needs a long warm growing season. Put in transplants after the last frost. Sweet potatoes are enlarged roots called tuberous roots. They have a few buds at one end and cannot be cut up like potatoes. They don’t always produce well in Michigan because of the cool summers.