

Greening the Spuds

Sounds like something you might do for a Saint Patty's day meal, but its not, although the timing is about right for our region. Greening is about getting your potatoes off to a good growing start, the old fashioned way.

“Greening” also called “chitting” the seed potatoes is done by placing them in bright light, one layer deep for a couple of weeks – longer is necessary. The eyes will produce green sprouts that remain short as long as they are left in the light. Place the seed potatoes in the dark and they will grow into potato plants. Plant them 6-8 inches deep in well drained soil, keep them damp, but not soggy and in two to three weeks green plants will emerge.

Why Greening or Chitting?

You know that annoying persistency of potatoes to turn green in the light? Well, that's part of the reason for Greening your spuds. Light stimulates the formation of alkaloids in the potatoes, which protect them from insects and some fungal diseases – not a bad thing to have if you are going to be stuck underground for a while. The green leaves also begin producing food for the developing plant. Do not remove the green sprouts before planting – waste of time and growing potential. How many eyes should the seed spud have - at least two, not more than five. If you are using large seed potatoes, cut them into pieces – 2-3 ounce pieces are as small as you should go. I prefer to plant small (about golf ball size) whole seed potatoes.

Reasons for Growing Your Own

Potatoes are so cheap, why grow your own – with all the work and space required? My reasons may not work for you, but are simple to understand. I like pulling new potatoes out from under the bush – it's a lot like gathering eggs from under a warm hen. If you are growing early potato varieties you can start harvesting young tubers as early as a couple of weeks after the plants bloom. Just feel around under the plants for the small tubers and extract them gently. Make sure you cover up the roots again and keep them well watered. Try new potatoes with chopped leeks, tarragon and butter for a true garden grown delight – reason enough to grow your own! Another reason is that I grow better potatoes than I can buy! Variety matters in potatoes. In most supermarkets you will find three potato varieties – white, red and russet, although the Gold's are gaining popularity. Occasionally you can find blues and fingerlings – but the season is short. Contrast this with the more than 5,000 known potato varieties and its clear how our commercial food system sacrifices diversity at the alter of profitability.

Variety Matters

Potatoes are very easy to grow in our region and soils – if you plant the right varieties at the right time of year. Because of the alkalinity here, it's best to use scab resistant varieties – I have had success with Norgold, Red LaSoda and Krantz. If you want heat tolerant, varieties try Red LaSoda, Yukon Gold, Norgold and Kennebec. I also regularly grow Red Norlands here and find them well suited to my soil and taste. The Rio Grande Russet grows well here, if you can find seed potatoes. I have had poor growth and tuber

production from the German Yellow Fingerlings and the blues – but that doesn't mean they can't be grown here.

You can grow a second crop by planting in late summer and taking advantage of our mild fall weather. Order your seed potatoes early enough that you can chill them for 2-4 weeks (the refrigerator will do), "chit" them for 2 weeks and plant by mid-August. It's safest to work with short season varieties at this time of year – in case of an early frost.

During the monsoon season the extra rainfall not only reduces the need for irrigation, but also keeps the soil cooler – the key to good tuber production.

Keys to Growing Potatoes in Las Cruces

Plant early – 4 weeks before the last frost date (they can take light frost early in life)

Water evenly – mulch heavily – keep the soil cool (50 degrees is optimum)

Plant late – at least 8 weeks before the first frost date

Variety matters – use scab and heat resistant varieties that taste good to you

Where to get seed potatoes

[Ronnigers Potato Farm](#)

[Seeds of Change](#)

Potato History

They have a long and fascinating history beginning at least 6,000 years ago in Peru and spreading throughout the world with early explorers. There is a fascinating relationship between potatoes, population growth and warfare.

Good Reads

Blue Corn and Square Tomatoes – Rebecca Rupp

The Potato – Larry Zuckerman

The Potato, Treasure of the Andes, From Agriculture to Culture - Edited by C.Graves

An illustrated version of this article is on the web at:

<http://www.darrolshillingburg.com/GardenSite/greeningSpuds.html>

till next time,

Darrol Shillingburg

Master Gardener