

## GROWING GUIDE FOR POTATO

<b>Binomial Name:</b>	Solanum
<b>Varieties:</b>	Argos, BP1, DiVAA, Harmony, Valor, Marvel
<b>Start:</b>	'Chitted' seed potatoes
<b>Germination:</b>	10-20 days, 10°C to 15°C
<b>Seed Life (viability):</b>	(under ideal conditions) 6-12 months
<b>Soil:</b>	Well drained
<b>Sunlight:</b>	Full sun
<b>Plant:</b>	35cm apart in rows which are 75cm apart
<b>Thin to:</b>	
<b>Ave. Days to Harvest:</b>	60-120 days
<b>Good Companions:</b>	Beans, Brussels Sprouts, Caraway, Dill, Kohlrabi, Mint, Spinach, Sweetcorn, Yarrow
<b>Bad Companions:</b>	Asparagus, Cauliflower, Celery, Cucumber, Onion, Peas, Pumpkins, Raspberry, Sunflower, Tomatoes

### Chitting:

You will need to "chit" the seed potatoes before you can plant them. Chitting is simply the process of allowing them to sprout, from the natural "eyes" of the potato, before planting.

Place the seed potatoes in boxes (for small amounts, cardboard egg boxes are ideal) in a light and airy position at a temperature of roughly 10°C.

The potato seed should be positioned so the sprouts are uppermost and the 'stalk' end (where they were severed from the parent plant) is at the bottom. Sometimes this is a bit difficult to judge, but if you get it wrong, and the potatoes sprout from the bottom end, simply rub off the sprouts and turn the potato to the correct position.

As the potato seed produce sprouts, remove all but the best 2-4 sprouts to ensure that they receive all the goodness of the seed potato. The ideal sprout length at planting time is 2.5cm although this is not critical. What is critical is that the sprouts are green and not white coloured. White sprouts are caused by not enough light.

If the sprouts appear too early for planting the potatoes outside, simply rub them off cleanly and they will re-sprout in a couple of weeks time. Research has shown that the sprouts can be removed up to five times without any ill effect on the sprouts which will replace them.

### Planting:

Mid August to mid October (depending on your area) is the ideal time to plant the sprouted potatoes in the open ground. Late varieties can be planted during December.

Planting into the Ground: Plant maincrop potatoes about 35cm apart, in rows which are 75cm apart. Where you are planting more than one row, the rows should (ideally) run from North to South to allow each plant its full share of sun.

Dig a trench about 10cm deep, placing the potatoes in it with the sprouts pointing upwards. Hand fill the trench over the potatoes trying to avoid damaging any sprouts. Scatter bonemeal or similar long lasting organic fertiliser over the top soil and rake it in.

Planting in Tyres or "High-rise" Boxes: Plant two to three potatoes, evenly spaced, per tyre or one to two per 30cm box.

### **Growing:**

Frost damage is the first concern during the early stages. If shoots emerge above the soil level and frost threatens, draw a little soil from the bed edges over them.

After the plants have grown to about 20cm, rake up some soil from in between the rows and cover the plants with it, leaving only a few centimetres of the top of the plant still showing. Repeat this exercise again in two to three weeks time.

During the growing season, ensure that weeds are removed regularly. A month or so after planting, the dense foliage of the plant should then block out sufficient light to deter all but the most vigorous weeds.

As the potato plant grows, do not remove or 'stop' the foliage, it is supplying food to the tubers. However, remove any flower heads or buds which appear because these will produce potato seeds which will divert energy from the potato tubers.

Growing in Tyres or "High-rise" Boxes: As above - As the plants grow, keep adding soil to cover them (leaving only a few centimetres showing) and keep adding tyres or box sections to grow your high-rise structure. It is not advised to build the structure more than a meter high though.

### **Harvesting & Storage:**

Potatoes are ready for harvest when the foliage first starts to die and turn yellow. Early (new) potatoes can be lifted earlier to get the very tastiest potatoes. In this case, harvest them about a week after the potato plant flowers first appear. New potatoes only produce a couple of handfuls of potatoes per plant, so dig up the whole plant.

For all potatoes, dig them up from the side of the ridge (a fork or spade are both fine) to avoid damaging the potatoes. The foliage can be placed on the compost heap only if it is completely free from disease - if not, burn it. If you don't need all the potatoes from a plant at one time or if you want a few early in the season, simply burrow around the roots with your hands and remove the potatoes you need. The remaining potatoes will continue to grow.

Remove any soil clinging to the potatoes and leave them on the soil for a few hours to dry out - if they are stored damp, they will rot. Leaving them on the soil surface in the sun will harden the skin slightly, doubling the storage time - this is especially important for maincrop potatoes. Store the potatoes in boxes or sacks, checking them every few days, removing all but those in good condition. Damaged or blemished potatoes should be eaten immediately.

**A word of caution:** Some potato flowers may well turn to berries which are definitely poisonous. Eaten in sufficient amounts the berries can be fatal. You may wish to remove them if children are likely to see them.

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## **A SPECIAL NOTE ON SEED POTATOES IN SOUTH AFRICA:**

Potatoes are grown from specially produced "seed potatoes" and not from actual seeds. Government regulations regarding the production of seed potatoes for sale in South Africa are very strict. This is mainly to prevent outbreaks of diseases like Early Blight, which has the potential to devastate the commercial potato industry.

ALL seed potatoes must first be registered and listed with the Department of Agriculture (an expensive process) before undergoing a rigorous testing and 'commercial suitability' process in order to be 'certified' for sale. There are presently no organic or heirloom seed potato varieties in SA that have been through this process so the only seed potatoes available to us organic home gardeners are the standard commercial varieties.

### **Seed Potato Availability:**

Most retailers only get their stock of seed potatoes in around the end of July for the Aug-Dec planting season and stocks are very limited, if at all available, during the rest of the year.