

## **Post Rock Answers**

**By Cassie Thiessen March 3, 2023**

**Post Rock Extension District Horticulture Agent**

### **All About Potatoes**

If you have been gardening in Kansas for long, you probably know of the tradition to plant your potatoes on St. Patrick's Day. In the Post Rock District, you may want to wait a few weeks later and plan to get your potatoes in the ground the first of April, depending on the weather. Whether you are new to gardening or a pro, potatoes are an easy crop that can be grown in containers or the garden. Follow these tips to have a successful harvest this summer.

Potato skin color can be white, red, yellow, or russet (brown). Flesh color is usually white or creamy yellow. There are newer varieties that have purple skin and flesh or pink flesh. Varieties differ in texture as well. The russet varieties are particularly good for baking as they have a mealy, crumbly texture when baked. White, yellow, or red varieties are usually preferred for boiling or mashing.

Because tuber development is best when temperatures are mild and cool, selecting early maturing varieties will be more successful. This ensures that tuber development occurs before the soil is too hot. Most russet-skinned varieties require a longer growing season and do not perform as well as red, yellow, or white varieties.

When purchasing potatoes buy quality seed potatoes that have been inspected and are disease free. You don't want to use potatoes from the produce section of the grocery store because they are often sprayed with chemicals to slow sprouting. Seed potatoes are certified disease free and have plenty of starch to sprout as quickly as the soil temperatures allow. Each pound of potatoes will yield approximately eight to ten seed pieces. One pound should be enough to plant roughly a ten-foot row.

Before planting the potatoes, cut the seed pieces two to three days prior so freshly cut surfaces have a chance to "suberize", or heal, and form a protective coating. Store the seed pieces in a warm location during this process to speed the healing along. Most seed potatoes can be cut into four pieces; though large potatoes may be cut into a few more. Each seed piece should be between one and a half to two ounces to insure there is enough energy for germination. Make sure each seed piece is about the size of an egg and has at least one "eye" for new growth.

Potatoes thrive in loose, easily tilled soils high in organic matter. Avoid heavy, “sticky” soils and areas where water drains slowly or stands for a long time. If this isn’t possible in your backyard garden, consider planting in a large container or grow sack.

Plant each seed piece about one to two inches deep and eight to twelve inches apart in rows. Make sure the eye of the potato is facing up. Though it is important to plant potatoes in early Spring, emergence is slow. As the potatoes grow, pull soil up to the base of the plants. New potatoes will grow above the planted seed piece, and it is important to keep sunlight from hitting the new potatoes. Exposed potatoes will turn green and can’t be eaten. Keeping the potatoes covered with soil will prevent this from happening.

Potato vines are sensitive to frost, so plan to cover the plants if there is a late freeze expected after growth has developed above ground. If the vines are killed due to frost, the plant will not be able to continue growing. Potatoes need regular, consistent watering, especially during development when the plants are 6 to 12 inches tall. Irregular watering lowers yields and may result in rough knobs on the tubers. Mulches can be useful in holding moisture near the plant.

Early or new potatoes can be harvested as the plants are growing by gently removing some plants in the row. Begin digging potatoes when the vines are about half dead. Remove excess vines and carefully dig the tubers. Allow them to surface-dry out of the sun for a day or more to toughen the skin. Alternatively, wait until a week after the vines have died to harvest, which allows the skins to toughen before harvest. Sort out any damaged tubers for use first and store only the best quality potatoes. Then move potatoes into a cool, dark location for storage. Ideal storage temperature is 45 to 50°F.

Potatoes should not be grown in the same location year after year. A three-year rotation reduces pest problems that may accumulate with continual potato crops and uses soil nutrients not used by other garden crops.

If you plant a potato patch this spring, chances are you will taste a difference from those store bought spuds. If you have any questions on planting potatoes contact your local Post Rock District Extension Office.

*Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at [cchiessen@ksu.edu](mailto:cchiessen@ksu.edu) or by calling Beloit at 785-738-3597*