

Successful Potato Production

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

When many of us think about spring gardening we think potatoes. One of the reasons we think potatoes is because they are one of the earliest vegetables that we can plant in the spring and just about everyone likes potatoes. So by default, they become a popular choice.

While St. Patrick's day is traditionally the time to be planting potatoes, the soil has been slow to warm this year, so there is still time to get these tubers in the ground. I like to have soil temperatures reaching the 50 degree mark before planting and as of early this week soil temperatures were only in the low to mid 40's. We've had enough cool weather this past week that it hasn't warmed up that much more, but probably hasn't cooled off very much either. What many people don't realize is that you can also plant potatoes in mid-July for a fall harvest!

Potatoes are a cool season crop native to the Andes mountain regions of South America. They don't like hot weather which is why the summer planting for a fall crop can actually work out very well. Since a spring planting does put us into potential hot weather issues we want to plant shorter season varieties whenever possible. One of the more popular potato varieties, Yukon Gold, is more of a mid-season variety and may work better for a fall harvest planting.

The types of potatoes you grow depends on your intended usage. If you want baking potatoes, then use russet-skinned varieties. Good choices for Kansas include Norgold and Norkotah. White and red skinned potatoes are preferred for boiling or mashing. Recommended red-skinned varieties include Red Norland, La Rouge, La Soda, Viking and Reddale. White-skinned varieties that have done well in Kansas include Superior, Norchip, Crystal, Kennebec and Irish Cobbler.

We have two big challenges when it comes to growing potatoes, heavy clay soils and high pH or alkaline soils. Potatoes grow best in soils of pH 5.0 to 6.5. Unfortunately many of our gardens have a soil pH over 7.5! If you really want to grow good potatoes you need to lower the pH with sulfur that is applied and tilled into the soil. To know how much to apply requires a soil test first. The other challenge is that potatoes prefer well drained loamy soils. Our soils often are high in clay. The best way to deal with this is annual applications of organic matter that is also tilled into the soil. These are long term operations that will make a difference over several years of application.

We plant potatoes as seed potatoes which are cut up pieces of potatoes, each containing at least one eye. In the spring we plant potatoes about two inches deep so they warm up quickly. For summer planting we plant them four to five inches deep. Plant seed potatoes about twelve inches apart in the row in rows about three feet apart.

New tubers will be formed along the stem ABOVE the seed potato piece. So it becomes very important as the plant grows to hill up or mound up the soil around each plant. You may do this several times during the early part of the growing season. Fertilize before planting and side dress a couple of times during the growing season using a balanced fertilizer like 12-12-12. It works well to fertilize just before you hill the plants. It is also important to keep potatoes well watered, but don't drown them if you have heavy soils.

In spite of all our challenges, we can grow pretty good potatoes in our area. If your spring crop doesn't work well, don't forget that you can plant in July for a fall crop also. For more information on growing potatoes, stop by the Extension Office!