

## St. Patrick's Day and Potato Planting

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Quick! Why do we plant potatoes on St. Patrick's Day? Yeah, I'm not really sure either. It's not the sign of the moon because the sign of the moon is never the same from one St. Patrick's Day to another. It's not because potatoes came from Ireland because they didn't. In fact, if I could find the person that started that old gardener's tale that you have to plant potatoes on St. Patrick's Day, I'd give them a piece of my mind. Given the weather the past few months I don't want anyone out there planting potatoes today. It's too wet and the soil is still too cold! Let it warm up and dry out for crying out loud!

Well, while we're on the topic of potatoes, let's dive into that a little bit more. While Ireland is well known for potatoes they didn't originate from there. Potatoes are from the mountainous Andes region of Bolivia and Peru. They are a cool weather plant that thrives best where average growing season temperature is under 70. It is estimated that there are over 2,000 species of potatoes still in the wild.

The potato arrived in Europe in 1537 when Spanish explorers brought them back from Colombia. Because potatoes provide such an economical food source, on a per calorie basis, many middle ages governments in Europe ordered the people to grow potatoes or pomme de terre in French, which means ground apple. The potato finally arrived in Ireland in 1663 where it quickly became a popular and regular food source being very fit for growing in the cool Irish climate. It's popularity continued for nearly two centuries until disaster set in. Interestingly, potatoes were taken to Virginia in 1621 prior to its widespread production in Ireland.

The cultivar of potato that was grown in Ireland has commonly been called the lumper potato or sometimes the Irish lumper (which you can still find and grow by the way). The typical way that seed, or seed potatoes, were selected in those days was to simply identify the best looking plants and then keep the potatoes back from that plant. Since you are growing a plant from a tuber it will continue for years genetically unchanged. This resulted in a cultivar being grown that had a very narrow genetic base, a plot ripe for drama!

In 1845-46 the fungal disease Late Blight (*Phytophthora infestans*) exploded across Ireland wiping out the principle food crop of the country and causing widespread famine. This famine then led to massive emigration from Ireland to the US in the mid 1840s. Although the potato had been in the New World since 1621 it really wasn't widely grown until it was planted in New Hampshire in 1719 from seed stock the Scotch-Irish immigrants had brought from Ireland which is how it became known as the Irish potato, even though it was from South America!

We encourage planting of potatoes as one of the first crops of spring in Kansas gardens because they do need that cool weather for good production. But you have to temper that St. Patrick's Day planting myth with the recognition that soils need to be above 40 degrees and the soil also has to be dry enough to work without making a mess. Our typical potato planting season is mid March to mid April. However, you can also plant potatoes in July for a fall harvest.

Regardless of the common misunderstandings about potato's heritage and planting instructions, they are still a good garden crop in much of the state and a good food source that is easily grown in most gardens. They are not related to sweet potatoes though! And Idaho does grow the most potatoes, though I've never actually met a famous potato. If you'd like more information on growing potatoes, we have a bulletin available at the Extension Office.