

Wally's Weekly News 9th AUGUST 2008
Written by Wally Richards.

POTATO TIME

This season's certified seed potatoes are now available in garden centres through out New Zealand.

The first certified seed potatoes are normally the fast maturing types which are referred to as 'early' or 'first early' which include the following varieties: Swift 60 days; Liseta 60-90 days; Rocket 60 days; Jersey Bennes 90 days; Cliff Kidney 90 days, Ilam Hardy 90 days and Maris Anchor 90 days.

The number of days after each variety indicates the time, after sprouting, the potatoes take to mature given average growing conditions.

Seed potatoes have to be broken out of their dormancy before they will grow and we call this 'sprouting.' If you were to place non sprouted seed potatoes into the cold soil of the garden nothing would happen till the soil warmed up. If the soil happened to be too wet for an extended period, then the seed potatoes would likely rot in the ground.

Potatoes are a seasonal crop having a built in dormancy period which varies between varieties with many of the early potatoes only having a short dormancy unless they are chilled.

In the natural flow of nature a potato will sprout in the soil when the soil temperature rises. This will often be later in spring or early summer.

The potato will grow to maturity; produce a crop of tubers and flower.

The flowers produce green, small tomato like seed pods which you will often see on mature potatoes.

These pods contain seeds which if given the chance, will become potato plants in their own right.

The tops of the potato plants die off leaving the tubers in the soil. As the soil cools in autumn the tubers in the soil go into dormancy which is further assisted by the colder soil conditions of winter.

In the spring when the soil warms the cycle repeats. It is this natural dormancy aspect that allows us to grow a sizable crop of potatoes and store them for later use.

That is of course as long as we store them correctly in as cold as possible conditions. Late crops that mature in autumn should be left in the soil to store naturally which works fine as long as the area is not prone to excess water in winter. If the soil becomes water logged for an extended period then the potatoes may rot. Otherwise you just dig up a few tubers as you need them. Bringing too many tubers indoors to the warmer temperatures will break dormancy and the potatoes will start to sprout.

This is the method that you use on the certified seed potatoes that you will buy over the next few weeks. Bring them inside where it is warm and start the tubers sprouting. If you want to achieve sprouting even quicker, place the seed potatoes in the hot water cupboard.

As soon as the little sprouts appear you then set the seed potatoes out onto a tray with their shoots upwards. The tray is placed outside in a sunny or partial shade situation that is frost free.

Under a car port or evergreen trees and shrubs is ideal as the potatoes will have frost protection from above and ample light to 'green up' The greening happens to any potato

when it is exposed to light for a period of time. This greening hardens up the new shoots and prepares the seed potato for planting out.

A question that is often asked of me by gardeners is 'Can I plant the potatoes that have sprouted from home grown potatoes or purchased ones, or do I have to buy new certified seed potatoes'?

A good question and the simple answer is if you want a good crop of potatoes then always buy fresh certified seed potatoes. There are two reasons for this. The first and most obvious is that certain diseases can be carried on the tubers and using non-certified seed potatoes could introduce these diseases into the new crop. Certified seed potatoes are checked while they are growing and post harvest for any diseases and if free of problems they obtain certification.

The less known reason is that many potato varieties grown these days are bred to fail after the first initial crop.

The reason for this, I have been told, is the potato breeders want to keep their jobs.

If you grow a variety of certified seed potatoes and harvest a good crop that is all that is meant to happen. If you keep a few of the crop and grow them then the second generation crop will likely have a few good sized potatoes at harvest and the rest will be small. Take the better potatoes from this and you will likely end up with a crop of marble size potatoes on the third generation.

This does not apply to heritage varieties and the potatoes we call Maori potatoes. They should crop well year after year as long as diseases do not affect the tubers.

If you have plenty of garden room you can grow some of the sprouted seeds from purchased potatoes or previously grown crops. Hedge your bets and also plant ample new certified seed potatoes as well.

Buying an early variety such as Jersey Bennes about now gives you time to sprout the potatoes and green them up ready for planting out later in August. Taking 90 days from planting to maturity will have nice new potatoes ready for Xmas 2008.

So don't delay. The best seed potatoes originate from the South Island because of the colder conditions. One supplier marks their certified seed potato bags 'South Island Grown' Look for them.

Another interesting method is when you place your just sprouted seed potatoes out into trays try doing the following; Lay untreated sawdust in the base of the tray to cover about 10-20mm deep, next lay your seed potatoes onto the sawdust with their sprouts facing upwards. Then cover completely the tubers with more untreated sawdust and drench the tray/sawdust with Magic Botanic Liquid at 20ml per litre of water. Keep the sawdust moist by watering as need be.

Not only will the seed potatoes produce sprouts but they will also produce a nice root system too which means they will establish quicker when planted out in the garden or in containers.

When planting your now sprouted seed potatoes out there are some ingredients that you can use to advantage: The ingredients are Gypsum one tablespoon, sheep manure pellets, small handful, Ocean Solids, quarter of a teaspoon, BioPhos, a teaspoon full and Simalith Rock Dust (or Rok Solid) half a teaspoon.

The Gypsum supplies ample calcium and sulphur, the sheep pellets, a natural NPK fertiliser, Ocean Solids about 90 minerals and elements, the BioPhos supplies natural

soil conditions of winter.
 In the spring when the soil warms the cycle repeats. It is this natural dormancy aspect that allows us to grow a sizable crop of potatoes and store them for later use.
 That is of course as long as we store them correctly in as cold as possible conditions. Late crops that mature in autumn should be left in the soil to store naturally which works fine as long as the area is not prone to excess water in winter. If the soil becomes water logged for an extended period then the potatoes may rot. Otherwise you just dig up a few tubers as you need them. Bringing too many tubers indoors to the warmer temperatures will break dormancy and the potatoes will start to sprout.
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 As soon as the little sprouts appear you then set the seed potatoes out onto a tray with their shoots upwards. The tray is placed outside in a sunny or partial shade situation that is frost free.
 Under a car port or evergreen trees and shrubs is ideal as the potatoes will have frost protection from above and ample light to _green up_ The greening happens to any potato when it is exposed to light for a period of time. This greening hardens up the new shoots and prepares the seed potato for planting out.
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 The Gypsum supplies ample calcium and sulphur, the sheep pellets, a natural NPK fertiliser, Ocean Solids about 90 minerals and elements, the BioPhos supplies natural phosphate and beneficial micro organisms, the Simalith supplies additional magnesium, silica and elements.
 These products will greatly assist in keeping the plants healthy and free of diseases while growing.
 They also enrich the crop in minerals and elements which are great for your own health.
 Root crops will take into themselves more of any elements in the soil than foliage crops.
 This is a good reason to avoid harmful chemical fertilisers and sprays including any herbicides.
 You don't want these in your home grown potatoes as you already get enough of them in any potatoes you buy.
 Home grown potatoes generally speaking have far better flavour than most purchased ones with the exception of organic grown and potatoes from some South Island growers.
 Your own potatoes will have better cooking aspects with added health benefits.
 There are lots of good reasons to grow your own potatoes.
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