

Buried Treasure: Know your spudz

Potatoes are a great crop for beginners, they are fairly easy to grow organically and can be a real money saver if you use a lot of potatoes. However they take up a lot of space and have a few significant pests and diseases that are tricky to tackle organically, but they are well worth it in terms of flavour. The flavour of freshly dug new potatoes is far superior to that of shop bought ones as storage deteriorates the flavour of new potatoes.



Did you know that potatoes are not really root crops at all? In fact the tubers that we eat are really swollen, underground stems evolved by the plant to store energy to survive the winter. In a crop rotation system they usually occupy a bed of their own, and should not be grown with the true 'root' crops (carrots and parsnips etc) because they have very different soil requirements.

In late winter here in France you will find a bewildering range of 'seed' potatoes in the shops and for a beginner it may be difficult to know what to buy. ('seed' potatoes are actually young tubers developed to be virus free and not the seeds of the plant at all)

There are two key groups of potato; 'earlies' and 'main crop'. If you are familiar with the English terms for these you will know that the early group is split into first earlies and second earlies. These early potatoes, as the name suggest are the earliest to plant and mature quickly for the first harvest of 'new' type potatoes. Most early varieties of potato give you those lovely small, waxy salad type potatoes that are good for boiling and steaming or putting on the BBQ and can be eaten hot or cold once cooked. In France they are known as *Précoces*, (the equivalent of our 'first earlies' - time from planting to harvest is 90 days) and semi-*précoces* or demi-*précoces* (Second earlies/110days) Early varieties start cropping in June and you can

begin lifting the tiny tubers as soon as you see the flowers begin to fade on the plant. You can dig them up fresh as you require them although they will store in the refrigerator for a week or so.

Maincrop types generally give you the bigger, flourier potatoes that are better for mashing, baking and roasting and if harvested and stored correctly will last through the winter. Look out for 'semi-tardives' or 'demi-tardives' (120 days) and 'tardives' (120 days +) Main crop potatoes are normally harvested all at once when the 'haulm' (green parts of the plant above ground) have died back. Dig them up on a warm dry day and leave them on the soil surface to dry out for a few hours and then pack all of the whole, blemish free ones into paper or hessian sacks. They will store for several months in the dark in a cool but frost-free place. Any that you damage while harvesting, or any with pest damage should be used quickly, cutting out any bad bits as they will not store.

The main enemy of potatoes is blight which is the disease responsible for the Irish Potato Famine of the mid 1800's and is prevalent after a period of warm, damp weather and affects main crop potatoes the most as they are in the ground for longer than the earlies. You can use a preventative spray of Bordeaux mix, but if you prefer to keep all chemicals away from your crop prevention is the key: practice crop rotation, make sure that you remove all potatoes from the soil after harvesting and if you have had trouble with blight, stick to the early crops or resistant varieties such as 'Sarpò Mira' and 'Desiree' in the future. Colorado beetles are also a problem and can devastate crops. All that you can do is be vigilant, checking your potatoes daily and picking them off or use a horticultural fleece such as Enviromesh to prevent the adult beetle landing on the foliage and laying eggs.

While opinion is divided on whether to 'chit' potatoes before planting I would recommend it for early varieties because we need to force them into growth before planting them out in order to get an early crop. In late February/early March stand your seed potatoes 'rose end' up (the end with the most 'eyes') in a light, cool but frost free place and plant out when the shoots have grown about 2-3cm.

Recommended varieties of early potatoes include 'Belle de Fontenay' an heirloom French variety with long white tubers that remain waxy and firm, 'Accent' has a natural slug resistance, 'International Kidney' (Jersey Royal) and 'Charlotte' are popular for texture and flavour.

Of the white maincrop varieties 'Cara' is a good all round potato with a firm but floury white flesh and pink 'eyes' and of course there is the favourite 'King Edward'. A good French alternative is 'Blanche'. Red main crops include 'Desiree' which is smooth textured and good for mash and roasting and idely available in France, also the red variety local to the Limousin 'Dalida' is an excellent all round main crop potato that is well adapted to the climate here and stores well too.