



Potatoes – A Great Winter Crop

A client emailed a question regarding starting potatoes in January or February. The client was new to growing potatoes and was concerned that the mild winter might impact success.

Potatoes are a great winter-early spring crop and at this time of the year you will find seed potatoes available in local garden centers and on-line. And there's a potato planting solution for any sized garden! They can be planted in the ground in rows or in mounds, in containers, in potato bags, or in potato towers. Potato bags are made of fabric or felt and are found at garden centers. A potato tower can be made from chicken wire.

You'll want to look for Certified Seed Potatoes, which means they are certified disease free. Potatoes from the grocery store are not recommended. They are often treated to prevent sprouting and while they may grow, they are not certified disease free. You don't want to risk introducing disease to your garden.

Originating from the Andes mountain ranges of South America, potatoes are a cool season crop. The vines grow best when temperatures are 60° to 65° with a maximum of 80°. Tubers will start growing when soil temperatures are about 45°. Tuber production is reduced when soil temperatures reach 75° and stops completely at 85°. The vines are tender and will be damaged by frost at about 30°. Potatoes, depending on the variety, take 90-120 days but one could start harvesting small potatoes after about 60-70 days. With this information in mind it's safe to say that even with a mild winter mid-February is a good time to start planting potatoes in all parts of Alameda County. If you live in the cooler parts of the county you may want to consider a second crop in May. A third crop could be planted in late August or early September. Potatoes want 6 hours of sunlight and need regular irrigation.

The links below provide more specific information on how to grow and care for potatoes.

The first two articles are from the UC Vegetable Research and Information Center and provide information on the growing and care of potatoes. The second one has good information on the diagnosis of potato problems.

- http://vric.ucdavis.edu/pdf/potato_growingpotatoes.pdf
- <http://vric.ucdavis.edu/pdf/POTATOES/potato.pdf>

From the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at UC Santa Cruz this article provides information on some of the many varieties of potatoes as well as growing information.

<http://casfs.ucsc.edu/documents/for-the-gardener/potatoes.pdf>

Whatever planting method you choose the basic principles for successfully growing potatoes discussed in these articles will apply. If you choose a bag for growing potatoes you'll get directions with purchase of the bag. Directions for making a tower from chicken wire can be found at:

<http://homeguides.sfgate.com/plant-potatoes-towers-49957.html>

Enjoy your potatoes!

Got home gardening questions?

The Alameda County Master Gardener's help line is staffed Monday, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 10 to 1, 510-639-1371 or email us at anrmgalameda@ucanr.edu If emailing please provide the following information:

- Name, phone number and city
- Problem description - name of plant if applicable, when the problem began, cultural history such as watering, fertilizing, pruning, pesticides, etc.
- Photographs of the problem, if possible