

Growing and Eating Specialty Potatoes

By Basil Badley

September 12, 2008

Grow your own potatoes for greater variety, better taste.

Although potatoes originated in the Andes in South America, they are certainly a mainstay in the U.S. and Skagit County. The Mr. Potato Head toy has delighted children since 1952. A former U.S. vice president received lots of laughs by misspelling potato. No grocery store would be without potatoes to sell. And, what high-end steakhouse could survive without baked potatoes?

A drive through the farmlands in Skagit County shows an abundance of potatoes growing in the fields (see sidebar). As a matter of fact, Washington State is the second-largest potato producer in the U.S., generating 10,230,000,000 total pounds in 2007. Washington even has its own Potato Commission, located in Moses Lake. You can go to its Web site at www.potatoes.com for all kinds of information from home gardening to recipes by famous chefs.

You might wonder why you should bother planting and raising potatoes when they are so plentiful at the supermarket, and why should you be interested now after the season is really over. The answer is that there are many more varieties—and tastier varieties, some might say—available to plant than you see at most grocery stores. If you're an organic gardener, you can be sure there are no chemicals in or on your potatoes if you grow them yourself. In addition, potatoes are fun and easy to grow. For a more detailed explanation, read Steve Solomon's book, *Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades*.



Skagit County gardener Kim Olson grows a variety of potatoes every year. This year's crop includes white potatoes that are perfect for baking.

Photo by Kathleen Olson.

Now that you know why you want to do it, you can get ready to plant next spring. Potatoes are not frost hardy, so you should wait until the frost is behind us, usually mid- to late-May. Pick a site that is sunny and has good soil. Till the soil and add organic fertilizer. You want the potato seed pieces to rest upon reasonably moist and open fertile soil, and have the soil above them loose, airy and on the dry side. You can achieve this by barely covering the seed pieces at planting time and mounding compost over them as the vines sprout and grow. Keep mounding compost over the growing tubers so they are never in direct sunlight. The tubers form above the seed pieces and just below the sprouts.

Many home gardeners grow potatoes in barrels, stacks of old tires, and other containers.

Gardener's Supply sells a potato bin of porous fabric just for potatoes--just remember to keep the tubers covered. Another method is to plant the seed pieces in a 3-inch-deep trench and cover with straw. That way there is no digging. You just pull the straw away, take what you want, and replace the straw.

Whether you grow potatoes in open ground or in a container, it is important that you use certified seed pieces to be sure they are virus free. Don't use potatoes from the market. The best seed pieces are the small tubers that you do not cut, just plant them whole. If you have larger pieces, cut them so you have at least two eyes in the cut piece. Those eyes are the points from which a new potato plant will sprout.



Keep your potatoes covered as they grow by mounding compost, dirt, or straw over them. The goal is to prevent them from getting hit by direct sunlight.

Photo by Kathleen Olson.



These Yellow Finn potatoes are known for their buttery texture and superior taste. Photo by Jason Miller.

Now that you know how to plant them, you can decide what varieties to plant. Local nurseries and feed stores usually have reds, Yukon gold, and other white seed potatoes. Some catalogs have a much greater variety. Territorial Seed Company has fingerling types, All Blue, and many other varieties, and they are all certified-organic seed pieces. John Scheepers has a nice variety as well. Seeds of Change typically offers Yellow Finn, German Butterball, Red Sangre, and several other less-common choices.

Harvest time is after bloom. Final harvest is when the vines are completely dead and best when the soil is completely dry—something that is sometimes hard to do in the Pacific Northwest! If the rain just won't let them dry completely, put them in the garage out of the weather for a few days. Most potato varieties store well, and should keep well for several weeks if stored in a cool, dry location. You can then enjoy them at your leisure.

GOURMET POTATOES WORKSHOP

- **What:** “Gourmet Potatoes from Garden to Table” — a free WSU Know & Grow workshop, examines growing, storing, and eating specialty potatoes suitable for home gardens in western Washington, including the Makah/Ozette, a potato that has been grown by Makah tribal members since the 1700s. Presented by WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners, in partnership with the WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center.

- **When:** 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 16
 - **Where:** WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and Extension Center, 16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway), west of Mount Vernon
 - **Speaker:** Dr. Debra Inglis, WSU vegetable pathologist
 - **Learn more:** To suggest an idea or topic for a future WSU Know & Grow workshop, call 360-428-4270.
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Be a good potato neighbor

Did you know that potatoes are the No. 1 commodity in Skagit County, valued at \$65 million? That's a pretty good reason for us home-growers to be good neighbors to our county's commercial farmers, so that they can continue to contribute to our economy.

In 2008, the Skagit County potato industry saw an increase in potato flea beetle infestations, as well as late blight (*Phytophthora infestans*). Small-scale potato growers like home gardeners can help lessen these problems by controlling for flea beetles and diseases such as potato blight, so that they do not infect nearby commercial potato fields.



So, how do you keep these nasties at bay?

Let's start with late blight, which requires a combination of several management practices to achieve consistently good control. First, don't let it start in the first place. Do this by planting disease-free seed tubers, and pull up any volunteer potatoes (those that have sprouted from potatoes inadvertently left in the garden last fall).

Second, plant resistant varieties, such as Chieftain, Chippewa, Russet Rural, and Hudson. (No cultivar is immune to late blight, but these, among others, are moderately resistant.) Third, apply fungicides as needed throughout the growing season, remembering to follow the label instructions carefully. Fourth, hilling and vine-killing (killing off the above-ground foliage two weeks before your intended harvest time) reduce the incidence of tuber infection. Infected tubers should be removed before potatoes are stored.

As for potato flea beetles, keeping fields free of weeds is important. Late planting helps, too, since it throws off the timing of the flea beetle life cycle (when the beetles are ready to raise their families, their host plant—your potatoes— isn't available). Destroy plant residues and piles of cull potatoes to prevent beetle buildup. Trash around plant beds where beetles hibernate should be destroyed and beds covered. A number of insecticides (granular and foliar) are available to control adult flea beetles. Again, carefully read and follow label instructions when using any insecticides.

Next year, think ahead when planning your potato crop, and keep an eye on things as the growing season progresses. Our county's commercial potato growers will thank you.

Potatoes for your palate

Here are two recipes that are well suited to gourmet potatoes. Since this is an election year, we'll start with a **patriotic red, white and blue potato salad recipe** from Chef Kathy Casey.

Ingredients:

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| 6 cups (2 lbs.) small red, white and blue potatoes cut in 1-inch pieces | 1 Tbsp. fresh chives |
| 2 Tbsp. red wine vinegar | 1 Tbsp. fresh basil |
| ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil | ¾ tsp. salt |
| 1 Tbsp. Dijon mustard | ¼ tsp. black pepper |
| 1 Tbsp. chopped fresh oregano | ½ cup tiny-diced red onion |

Preparation:

1. Steam potatoes until very tender, about 12–14 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, in a large bowl, make the dressing by whisking together the vinegar, olive oil, Dijon, oregano, chives, basil, salt and pepper.
3. When potatoes are still warm, toss them with the dressing along with the red onions, and set aside until cool. Best served at room temperature.
4. Potatoes are not peeled in this recipe, thus giving a colorful and nutritional bonus. Be sure to toss with the vinaigrette while still very warm.

Source: Washington State Potato Commission

Next, a **blue potato soup recipe**, gathered from *Kitchen Garden* magazine.

Ingredients:

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| 6 cups peeled and cubed blue potatoes (about 2 lbs.) | ½ cup diced onion |
| 6 cups chicken broth | 1 garlic clove |
| 1 bay leaf | ¼ tsp. salt |
| 1 Tbsp. butter or safflower oil | 1/8 tsp. white pepper |
| ½ cup diced celery | 1 Tbsp. chopped parsley |

1. Put the potatoes in a large pot, add the broth, and bring to a boil, uncovered. When the broth begins to boil, crack the bay leaf between your fingers without breaking it, add it to the pot, reduce the heat to a simmer, and cover.
2. Heat a small skillet and add the butter and diced vegetables and garlic. Briefly sauté over medium heat until the onions and garlic are clear and the celery changes to bright green. Remove the skillet from the heat and set aside.
3. When the potatoes soften, in about 50 min., mash them in the broth. Add the vegetables and cook over low heat for 10 min. Add the salt and pepper. Taste, and adjust seasonings. Just before serving, stir in the chopped parsley.
4. Garnish with a dollop of plain yogurt and chopped chervil, or add a sprig of fresh lavender.

Serves 6

Source: Kitchen Garden (out of print), January 1999.