

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Potatoes growing in a garbage can? No, it's not a joke. Some people are actually doing that very thing. If you would like to try this fun project all you have to do is get a clean 20 gallon plastic garbage can. Drill 1/2 inch holes in the bottom for drainage. To help keep the can well drained drill a few holes on the sides one inch above the bottom.

Fill the container with 6 inches of good potting soil and mix in a handful of 14-14-14 Osmocote fertilizer. This slow release fertilizer will last about two and a half months. After that use a water soluble fertilizer about every two weeks to finish off the growing season. Plant whole seed potatoes in the soil about 5 inches apart and cover with an inch of soil.

After the potato plants have grown to 4 inches in height add compost to cover all but one inch of the plant. Then wait until plants grow another 4 inches and add more compost. Keep doing this until eventually the vines will grow above the containers top. The entire container will be filled with compost. At this time you may need to provide support by placing long stakes in each corner of the container to tie the plants to. Soon the vines will begin to flower and shortly after that little potatoes begin to form under the soil. You can harvest the small "new potatoes" and use them immediately, or when the tops begin to die down you can search through the compost for the larger potatoes which can be stored in a dark, cool, dry place.

Watering is vital during the growing period. It is important that the soil at the bottom of the container never dries out. Water carefully and avoid wetting the foliage. You can reduce the need for frequent watering if you keep the container where it gets sun in the early part of the day and shade in the hot afternoons. Still you may need to water daily in the hottest part of the summer. To dress up the garbage can a little and camouflage the plastic you can drill 2 inch holes at random on the sides of the container and plant brightly flowered summer annuals such as marigolds or Wave petunias.

There are several varieties of potatoes available which lend themselves very well to growing in containers. They also come in a variety of colors. Most red-skinned potatoes are good choices, especially 'Dark Red Norland' or 'Red Pontiac.' 'Rose Finn Apple' has a pink skin and yellow flesh. It is called a fingerling type potato because it is the same diameter the full length of the tuber and slices up into uniform circles. It is excellent for container growing. 'Yukon Gold' and 'Yellow Finn' are also good choices as in 'All Blue,' an heirloom potato which has a rosy purple skin and true blue flesh. Another good blue choice is 'Peruvian Blue.' Potatoes that are considered waxy are the best for containers. Russets are slow growing and are not as happy confined.

Whichever variety you decide to plant, it is very important to buy disease-free seed potatoes. Do not plant supermarket potatoes as they may harbor diseases that will affect your crop. If you use sterile potting soil to plant in, chances for disease free potatoes at harvest time are good. Soil moisture should be consistent. Uneven soil moisture will cause the potatoes to be misshapen and to have a mealy texture.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.