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SUMMARY

Potatoes are a rewarding and relatively trouble-free crop for home gardeners, particularly easy in raised beds with loamy soil.

Potatoes in Raised Beds

by Earlene Millier, UC Master Gardener

The easy-to-grow potato yields a prolific harvest.

One of the most rewarding crops for home gardeners is the potato. The bushy plants are easy to grow, fairly pest-free, and yield prolifically. The ideal soil for potatoes is sandy loam – not a common soil type in Bay Area gardens – but because potatoes are shallow-rooted, they are ideal for raised beds where you can create the right soil type.

Obtaining Potato Starts:

Potatoes are grown from other potatoes, and if you've ever had potatoes sprout in your kitchen you know how readily this happens. Don't use grocery store potatoes for planting because they may introduce diseases into your garden. Buy certified seed potatoes from a reputable local nursery or do an online search for "certified seed potato". Many varieties are available, including several known as "fingerling" in white, yellow, red, and even blue. Fingerling potatoes are small, prolific, and tasty, and are therefore especially appropriate for raised beds.

Setting up Raised Beds:

Raised beds should be at least 12 inches deep and filled to about six inches with a good planter mix and lots of compost. Locate them where they will get at least 4 to 6 hours per day of unobstructed sun. Before planting, work a complete, balanced fertilizer into the soil, following the recommended application rates on the package.

Planting Your Potatoes:

Seed potatoes can be planted from February through April, and a second crop can be planted in July or August. Seed potatoes can be planted whole if they are about the size of an egg or smaller. Larger ones can be cut into pieces. Make sure each piece has at least one "eye" because that's where the plant will sprout, and let the cut pieces sit out uncovered for two or three days to callus over so they don't rot in the ground. Plant the seed pieces in a three inch deep furrow twelve inches apart and cover with four inches of loose soil. When the plants are eight inches high, gently pile more

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loose soil around them so that only the top four inches of each shoot is showing. Do this again twice more as the plants grow. This will increase yield because the crop of potatoes will form between the seed potato and the soil surface.

Caring for Your Potatoes:

Potato plants require frequent, light watering or the potatoes will get knobby and misshapen. Water often enough to keep the soil consistently moist. A drip system is ideal for this. Mulching the beds will also help maintain soil moisture.

Light but frequent applications of a balanced fertilizer once the plants are three to four inches tall will increase yield. Use a fertilizer labeled 5-10-5 or 10-10-5 and follow the application rates on the package. Scatter dry fertilizer on the soil surface near the drip tubes, or where sprinklers will dissolve it if you’re using sprinklers.

Potatoes don’t require much training or pruning but pinching off flowers as they appear will help direct the plant’s energy toward potato production. Pull any weeds carefully to avoid damaging the roots of the potato plants.

If pests appear and the plants are sustaining damage, call the Master Gardener Help Desk at (925) 608-6683 for assistance.

Harvesting Your Potatoes:

You can harvest your potatoes either when the plants have finished blooming or, for bigger potatoes, when the plants die. Let the soil dry out for a week or two before harvesting to make it easier to find the potatoes. Dig them out carefully so you don’t damage them.

For More Information:

The following web sites and publications can tell you more about growing potatoes:

Potatoes

<http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/GARDEN/VEGES/potato.html>

Home Vegetable Gardening - White Potato

<http://vric.ucdavis.edu/pdf/potato.pdf>

Growing Potatoes Organically - Basics from Seed to Storage

http://vric.ucdavis.edu/pdf/organic_potatoes.pdf

Vegetable Gardening – Growing Potatoes

http://vric.ucdavis.edu/pdf/potato_growing_potatoes.pdf