

John's Tips for Successful Potato Growing

John Sargent has a lifetime of experience in organic growing. He was born in 1919 and was raised at a time when organic cultivation was still the norm prior to the introduction of chemicals during the war. He has been involved with the Soil Association, HDRA and Garden Organic from their inception to the present day. He was for many years a volunteer guide at Ryton Gardens and is President of the Heart of England Organic Group.



Cultivation of Potatoes

Dig a trench and put 4-5 inches (10-12cms) of leafmould in first then make a hole for the potatoes with a dibber and bed potatoes in 8 inches (20cms) deep. Water the leafmould if dry or use well rotted compost instead.

Potatoes need an acid soil with a ph of 4.5. If there is too much lime and a ph of 6.5 they will get scab. Add grass cuttings but not too thick a layer which would otherwise heat up. Grass cuttings increase the acidity and therefore help to prevent scab. Finally, pull the earth back over the row so as not to dry out the soil.

Commercially, farmers use artificial potash to firm up potatoes. The organic gardener can use comfrey

instead as this is high in potash. If using the early varieties of comfrey, eg Bocking 4, leave the comfrey to die off for 3 days (only if the sun is out) and then lay it on top of the row. If using the later varieties of comfrey, eg Bocking 14, the comfrey can be incorporated into the trench as the later varieties will not sprout as the early varieties are prone to do. Later on, when the tops are through, put a second application of comfrey leaves on the top and earth up the row with the zappa / hoe.

The only watering that you should ever need to do for potatoes is to water dry leafmould when planting as the leafmould will retain the moisture. In the old days they used to put partially composted horse muck in the trench in place of leafmould but potatoes were never watered during the growing season.

If the potatoes have sprouted and there is a danger of frost, either earth up the potatoes or cover with fleece. If the haulms get frosted, wash the leaves with cold water from a watering can at 5am before the sun comes up to prevent frost damage.

To get a few early potatoes from first earlies, you can pull the earth back to pick a few potatoes then cover them back up again to let them carry on growing.

Leave self-set potatoes (ie some left in from last year) where they are and use them as first earlies.

It is normal practice to chit potatoes prior to planting. This involves leaving them in a cool, frost free place in daylight to sprout. However, John has found that it is not

necessary to chit potatoes. Opinions differ on this. Some people even rub off the chits but John is not in favour of this. In Hungary they let chits grow long (which happens if chitted in the dark) and lay the potatoes in trenches and get good results with this. John has tried this method. He made long furrows 8 to 9 inches deep and laid Craig Royal potatoes in them, placed well rotted straw from old bales of straw over the top and then covered with soil and had an excellent crop.

Potatoes are one of the easiest crops to grow and they clear weeds with the exception of fat hen & couch grass. A bad crop of couch can even grow through potatoes so is best removed first. Always save seed from disease-free samples.



Traditional Potato Varieties and Cooking Qualities

50 years ago there was a shortage of potatoes because it was too dry and they did not crop too well. That was when **Desiree** red potatoes were brought in from Holland. The flesh was yellow and the flavour not as good as it did not suit our soil. John saved seed and found that they grew well in the second year in his soil and had a good flavour because of his organic soil.

Arran Victory is a very old maincrop variety. It is a round purple potato and cooks like balls of flour. Being a very floury potato, it produces the best roast potatoes when cooked in goose fat.

Back in the 1920s when John was a boy, they used to grow in 2 sections with purple sprouting one year and Arran Victory the next year. Seed potatoes were sourced from Alexander Brown, an old seed merchant in Scotland. There was never a problem with the ph of the soil (brassicas like a higher ph than potatoes) as the muck provided everything that was needed.

Sarpo varieties are maincrop that are very blight resistant so well worth growing, though do not have such a good flavour but are not floury. They should be left in the soil till the end of October. It is not a

good eating potato but the flavour improves when grown from one's own seed. They are also not damaged by slugs.

Pink Fir Apple has an ugly shape but a good flavour and makes a good salad potato. Ideally plant tubers in a leafmould bin in the spring and then plant courgettes on top and when the courgettes are finished, dig out the potatoes.

Romano is similar to Desiree but the eyes are not so deep and it is not as vigorous as Desiree. Desiree gives more quantity but Romano has a lovely shape and is more suitable for the small gardener. Both have a hard skin so they are more resistant to slug damage.

Marfona is another good white maincrop potato that cooks well.

Pentland Crown is a hardy maincrop that keeps out slugs.

Kestrel is a good second early potato that suits our soil & stores well if kept cool.

Top Tip: to stop potatoes breaking up when boiled, steam them or boil in water for a short time then pour off half the water and steam for the rest of the cooking time.

Pests and Diseases

Potato Blight Planting second earlies combats blight because if blight strikes you can cut the tops off and you will still have a good crop underneath. Blight can occur after 1 or 2 damp, muggy days in July. DEFRA will alert farmers 2 or 3 days before blight strikes so they can go out and spray but there is no need to use Bordeaux Mixture. Generally, wet summers suit potatoes. They grow bigger than normal but without blight. Growing different varieties also serves to confuse blight. Sarpo Mira is very blight resistant even when grown next to potatoes with blight.

It helps to strengthen the haulm against blight by spraying with nettle juice once a fortnight in the early stages of growth. To make nettle spray, mix 2 handfuls of nettles with 2.5 litre of boiling water, leave for 24 hours then use as a spray. You can add soft soap to aid application.

When you first notice blight, first cut off the first infected leaves so it does not spread. If it does spread it will become necessary to cut off all the tops of the potatoes but you can leave the tubers in the ground.

Wireworm To clear your ground of them prior to planting, sow mustard seed in the autumn then plough it in in spring before planting potatoes. Wireworm don't like the hot roots of the mustard.

Keel slugs eat potatoes under the soil. Sometimes they leave only a small entry hole into the potato so can be confused with wireworm. In a bad attack, slugs will eat out the inside of the potato. A way to trap slugs is to fill a 4-5 inch (10-12cm) plant pot with potato peelings, then bury it in the soil, leave it for a week, then dig it up to remove the trapped slugs. Rain/devil beetles eat keel slugs. Keel slugs breed in rotten wood as do vine weevils. Sarpos are not damaged by slugs. Desiree potatoes are less attacked by slugs as they have a harder skin. John has experience of leaving badly attacked potatoes in the ground which were clear of slugs by November as the rain beetles had dealt with them. You don't normally get slug trouble with second earlies. If there is a slug problem go for hard skin potatoes like Desiree and Romano.



Heart of England Organic Group is a local group for people interested in the environment, organic growing and food, covering Coventry, Warwickshire, Solihull, Sutton Coldfield and the surrounding areas. Please visit our website for details of our programme of visits and talks.