

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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St. Patrick's Day means Potatoes in the Ground

St. Patrick's Day just passed, which means it's time to get potatoes in the ground if you want to try growing them. When planting potatoes, use seed potatoes instead of potatoes you buy at the grocery store. Seed potatoes are confirmed disease-free and will have more starch in the plant, so they will grow as fast as the warming soil temperature allows. Cut seed potatoes into pieces that weigh about two ounces and have multiple eyes, and give them 2-3 days to form a protective coating. After this protective coating is formed, you can plant them in the garden 1-2" deep and 8-12" apart in the row.

New potatoes are formed above the original seed which can cause them to emerge from the soil. Soil should be mounded at the base of the plant to keep sunlight from hitting the new tubers and creating a poisonous substance called solanine. While it won't kill you, this substance will likely make you ill in smaller doses. It can be found in higher concentrations in green potatoes, so inspect your harvest carefully before consuming.

Potatoes are the tuberous root of the species *Solanum tuberosum*, which is in the same genus as tomatoes and eggplants, and the same family as peppers. Pests that affect these other plants also have a chance of affecting potato plants, especially the black flea beetle. In addition to the generalist black flea beetle, potatoes also have a specialist predator – the Colorado potato beetle. This destructive pest will appear on the plants as a reddish-orange larva with black spots down the sides, or as a tan-and-black-striped beetle consuming the above-ground foliage.

While spraying to control this pest might be the gut reaction, there are three effective methods of control that don't involve spraying and demonstrate the power of integrated pest management. First, place straw mulch around the base of the plants. Not only will this help delay the emergence of adults until your potatoes develop further, but it can also serve as additional cover for any potatoes that might pop up above ground level. Second, select early-developing potato varieties. The faster a potato develops, the less impact the feeding damage caused by the Colorado potato beetle will have. Lastly, rotate to other non-solanaceous vegetable crops. This will eliminate a major food source for the beetle and keep the population from spiking.

If you are having trouble successfully growing potatoes, your soil is probably to blame. Potatoes are one of the few garden vegetables that need soil pH in a specific range in order to grow, with success dropping off significantly once pH rises above 6.5, and if your soil is more clayey, it becomes harder for potatoes to expand, and wetter soil invites rot. You can substitute

sweet potatoes into the garden if site characteristics are unfavorable for Irish potatoes, as sweet potatoes will grow in almost any natural pH and are slightly more resistant to rot. If you're unsure what your soil pH is, bring a soil sample into one of our offices and we can test for pH levels to see if your soil is too alkaline, or if there is another site characteristic that could be inhibiting potato growth.

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