

Digging For Treasure

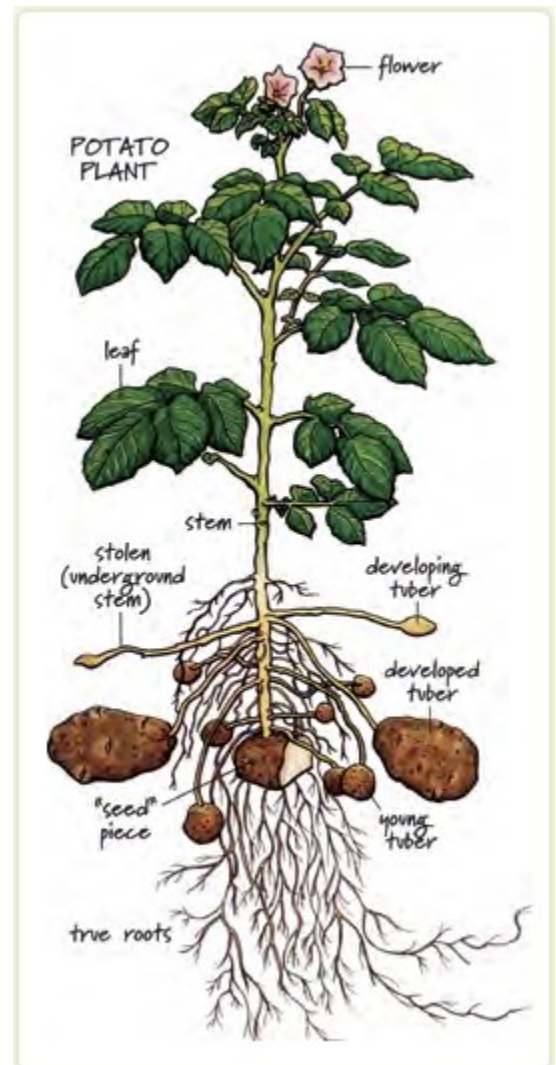
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Digging for potatoes is like looking for buried treasure, especially if you have young kids. Potatoes are a member of the Solanaceae family, which means the vines and green tubers are poisonous. They are a good source of vitamin C and provides calcium and iron. There are a lots of varieties, sizes and colors.

Potato is the world's fourth largest food crop, following rice, wheat, and maize. The Inca Indians in Peru were the first to cultivate potatoes around 8,000 BC to 5,000 B.C. Potatoes arrived in the Colonies in 1621. Idaho, the present-day largest producer of potatoes, begin growing potatoes in 1836, However, it wasn't until 1872 when the Russet Burbank variety was developed, that the Idaho potato industry began to flourish. French Fries were introduced to the U.S. by Thomas Jefferson. In 1853 railroad magnate Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt complained that his potatoes were cut too thick and sent them back to the kitchen the Chef then sliced some potatoes paper thin, fried them in hot oil, salted and served them, and potato chips were a hit.

Plant certified disease free seeds, when I say seed this means planting an "eye" of the potato. We have seen this when we leave a potato too long at room temperature, these eyes start to grow stems. They like constant moisture at about 1 inch per week. Inconsistent moisture causes cracks, hollow heart, and knobs. Start harvesting after the vines die, the potatoes at the top of the hill will be smaller (new potatoes) than the ones deeper.

Potatoes prefer cool climates, and can be planted soon after the last spring frost. They prefer a well-drained fertile soil that has a lower ph level (5 to 6.5). One reason for potato scab is because the ph is above 7, which represents most of Wyoming. The optimal growing temperatures for potatoes is 60 to 65 degrees, with a low of 45 and a high of 75. Planting distance is optimal at 6 to



12 inches between plants and 18 to 36 inches between rows. Potatoes store best at between 36 to 40 degrees with a 90 percent humidity. As with most vegetables they do better with low levels of salt in the soil. Potatoes are a heavy user of nitrogen and potassium, using @ .02 actual Nitrogen per hill, which is equal to putting on 5 pounds of actual nitrogen per 1000 square feet. Potatoes are considered a shallow vegetable with a rooting depth of 18 to 24 inches. The soil temperature needs to be at 40 degrees before planting. In Wyoming we can typically plant them mid to late May. They take between 80 to 140 days to mature.

Potatoes like to be planted with beans, peas, lettuce, spinach, and other early quick growing vegetables. Do not plant close to tomatoes, squash, and raspberries. As these either compete with the root system or carry the same insect or disease issues.

When planting potatoes one traditional way is to dig a trench and plant the seeds filling in the trench about halfway then as the potatoes start developing tubers then cover them with soil, and continue this process the rest of the growing season. Light turns the skin green which is then poisonous. You can also plant "hills" and as the potatoes grow then you can cover them with soil or mulch. The other method is to use large containers such as barrels (have drainage holes) put soil in the bottom, plant your seeds, then as they grow you can add soil or mulch till the barrel is full. This last method offers several advantages such as adding good loose soil and being able to amend it to have proper drainage and a lower ph. The barrels also make it easy to cover early in the spring from those late frost and the barrels also warm up a little quicker in the spring. Also a lighter row cover will keep most insects out of the barrels, thus eliminating controlling those pesky insects. And then of course to empty the barrels just turn them over.

Enjoy one of the most consumed crops this year, try a hill or two of potatoes.

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