

Growing potatoes in containers

This is an easy and rewarding activity for all ages.

Potatoes in containers will produce a convenient crop with only minimal care.

There are a few things you'll need, but getting things started couldn't be easier.

Detailed instructions follow.



Resources

- Container at least 30cm deep and wide. You can also use an old compost bag rolled down. Both need drainage holes.
- Growing medium, eg compost. See below.
- Certified disease free organic 'seed' potatoes (not potatoes bought for eating).

Activity

1. Choose which potato varieties you're going to grow. Decide how and when.
2. Follow planting instructions (below), adapting as required for your chosen containers, varieties, and time of year.

Extended Activity

Celebrate the harvest, cook something delicious with your crop and invite people for a potato-themed event.



Work safely

Be careful when handling containers and emptying soil to harvest potatoes. Follow the correct technique for manual handling and lifting. Follow safe practice for handling soil (eg cover open wounds, wear gloves if necessary, wash hands; keep tetanus vaccinations up-to-date, etc).

Instructions for growing potatoes in containers

1. 'Chit' tubers to encourage sturdy green sprouts. Chitting is not essential, but does give an earlier harvest. Place tubers in a clean egg box with the 'rose' end upwards (ie with the most buds). Label the variety and put the box in a cool, light place for 4–6 weeks (out of very bright sunlight). If left in the dark, tubers develop pale brittle shoots that easily break off. Chit potatoes that are already sprouting straight away. Otherwise leave in a cool, dark place until you are ready to chit them.



2. Prepare containers by adding 1-2cm wide drainage holes if the container or compost bag doesn't have any (at least five per 30cm²). Also put a 5-10cm layer of coarse materials at the bottom to improve the drainage, eg gravel, grit, crocs (broken terracotta pots) or broken-up polystyrene. Roll down compost bags. These are later unrolled as the plants grow taller and extra growing medium added.

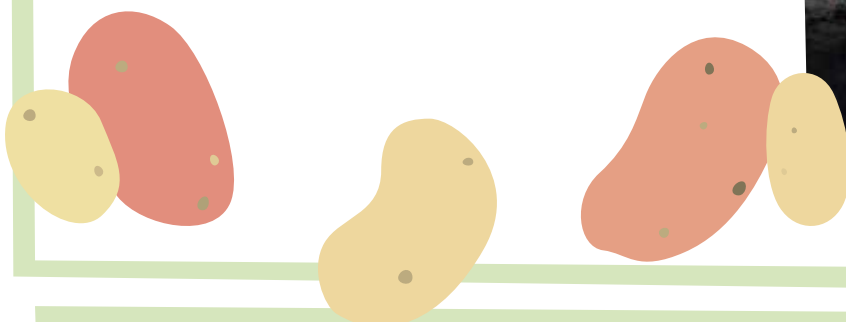


3. For growing medium, mix 50:50:

- Compost - home-made or bought organic, peat-free potting compost)
- 'Topsoil' - bought (the best quality sold as 'loam') or from a spare pile in your garden.



4. Half fill the container with growing medium; a minimum depth of 10-20cm. In rolled down compost bags, fill nearly to the top.



Top tip – Planting time and location

If you can protect the container from frost, start potatoes off 'under cover' early in the season, eg plant in a greenhouse, polytunnel or light place indoors as early as February. Otherwise plant outside from late March to April and protect growth from frost by covering with 'horticultural fleece' as required. You can plant tubers as late as July.

Instructions for growing potatoes in containers

5. Plant tubers when sprouts (tiny shoots) are 2cm long. Space equally on this layer around the edge of the container. Cover with 10cm of growing medium. Note: the number of tubers you can plant depends on the size of the container and the vigour of the variety. Try five in a dustbin-sized container and one to three in a 30-40 cm diameter container or compost bag.



6. Look after your plants:

- Add more growing medium in stages as the potato plants grows taller. This increases the harvest and stop potatoes going green. Cover the lowest 10cm of stem and continue this 'earthing up' until the growing medium is 5cm below the rim of the container. If using a rolled down compost bag, roll up to accommodate the extra growing medium.
- Water frequently, especially when the plants are flowering and tubers are forming. You may need to water twice a day in summer.
- Feed every three weeks with an organic concentrated feed such as comfrey liquid in the summer.



Top tip – Harvest time

'Early' varieties will be ready about 10-12 weeks after planting. Late/'maincrop' varieties are ready after about 20 weeks when the 'haulms' (stalks) have begun to die back. If you leave the potatoes in the container for too long they are more prone to slug damage.

After harvesting maincrop potatoes, let them dry for two hours before storing.

Glossary

Blanching – Excluding light from stems and leaves to produce more tender, usually less bitter and pale coloured growth.

Chit – Growing young shoots on potato tubers in light place before planting to advance crop.

Earthing up – Pulling soil around the base of the plants and stems to blanch stems, prevent wind-rock, and encourage rooting.

Growing medium – Growing mixture for cultivating seeds and plants.

Topsoil – uppermost layer of soil; most important for plants as it has most life and fertility.

Tuber – Swollen underground organ from a plant for food storage, eg potato.

Wind-rock – Destabilising plant roots caused by wind.