



ONIONS, POTATOES & SWEET POTATOES

ONIONS - The question on purchasing and planting onions is: what to plant... the onion plant, the onion set or the onion seed? Why not plant some of all three; they all have a different purpose and all have a place in your garden. Onions need full sun and well drained garden soils to do their best. Onions, like other garden vegetables, require an inch of water a week during growing season.

Onion Seed - All onion types can be started from seed. Onion seed can be grown indoors about 4-8 weeks before transplanting. Seed can also be sown directly into the garden as soon as the ground can be worked. Follow the packet directions for planting onion seed.

Onion Plants - Onion plants are grown for their flavor and size. Plant onion plants two weeks before the last frost date. Both short day and long day onions can be planted at the same time.

Dig a shallow trench and lay the onion plants against one side of the trench about an inch deep and four inches apart. When tops get long, shear off a couple inches. Short tops allow the plant to put more energy into developing healthy roots. Short day onions will begin to bulb quicker when there are 11 to 12 hours of daylight. Long day onions will want to bulb when there is at least 12 to 14 hours of daylight.

Onion Sets - Onion sets are purchased as a red, white or yellow onion. They are small, dormant onion bulbs that are ready to be planted. Plant these in early spring, giving them ample time to grow.

Onion sets are grown for young green table onions or harvesting later for a dry "keeping" onion. When planting onion sets, divide them into two sizes. Plant the largest sets together in order to have early green onions leaving smaller sets for dry cooking onions.

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Plant the sets 1-2 inches apart and 2-3 inches deep. When you harvest your table onions, pull every other plant allowing more space for the development of the remaining onions for cooking and storing.

Harvesting - The larger onions are ready to be harvested when the top of the plant begins to fall over. This occurs in late summer. Pull the onions and allow them to dry in the shade for a few days before placing them in storage. When the onions are ready for storage, tie the tops together with string and hang in a cool dry area or you may prefer to cut off the tops, leaving about 1-1½ inches of stem, then place in a mesh bag. Hang the bag in a cool, dry place for storage. Onions will occasionally bolt or produce a flower stalk. Unfortunately, once the onion does bolt, the quality of the onion bulb deteriorates rapidly and it should be harvested and eaten quickly.

POTATOES - One of the most popular vegetables in the home garden is the potato. Potatoes are susceptible to several disease so when selecting seed potatoes, it's important that you choose certified, disease-free varieties from a reliable garden center. Home-grown potatoes saved from the previous year's crop may be used but may carry undetectable diseases. Potatoes purchased at supermarkets may have been treated to prevent sprouting. Best results for quality and high yields are obtained by using certified seed potatoes.

Preparing Potatoes for Planting - The whole potato should be cut or chunked a minimum of 3-4 days prior to planting. This will allow the cut to heal before planting. The healing-over discourages rotting in cold, wet soil. Cut the whole potato into three to four chunks, making sure each chunk contains a minimum of 1-2-eyes.

Planting Potatoes

Potatoes should be planted as soon as the ground can be worked in the spring. This is usually late March or early April in The Central Midwest, a week earlier to the south and week later to the north. Plant the chunks cut side down and 12 inches apart in a furrow 4 inches deep in rows spaced two to three feet apart. Cover the potatoes with soil and as the plant grows, mound a hill of soil around the plant. The hill should eventually be 8-12 inches tall. Potatoes prefer loose, pliable soil that is well drained, fertile and slightly acidic. Usually one pound of seed potatoes will plant an 8-foot row. Purchase approximately 1200 pounds of seed potatoes to plant one acre.

Digging "New Potatoes"

Approximately 40-60 days after planting, the early potatoes will have blossomed. This is the sign that new potatoes may be ready. Carefully poke into the hill by hand to see what you find. You may either "rob" from several plants or simply harvest an entire plant from the end of a row.

Harvesting the Main Crop - For maximum yields, digging should not begin until the vines have begun to die. Potatoes should be mature by this time. Heavy frost will kill the vines if they have not died prior to this time. Drier soil is definitely an advantage when harvesting potatoes. If possible, leave the tuber in the ground for two weeks after the vines are dead. The skins will cure or toughen, protecting the potato from bruising during harvest.

Allow the potatoes to dry three to four days in a warm, shady and airy location before storing. Do not allow the potatoes to sit directly in the sun for any length of time after digging. After drying the potatoes, store in a cool, dry area.

SWEET POTATOES - Sweet potatoes are a member of the morning glory family, and can be grown in any location that is frost free for 100 days. They prefer light, sandy soil that is well drained. Sweet potatoes are heat and drought tolerant and are relatively free of disease and insects.

Growing Tips - Potted Plants are sold at your Earl May Nursery & Garden Center. Sweet potatoes should not be planted until all danger of frost is past and soil temperatures approach 70°F. Prepare the bed several weeks before the last frost date in your area in order to have loose soil to work with. Sweet potato plants should be planted in hills 4-6 inches above the soil level. The plants need to be planted 12-15 inches apart in the rows and the rows 3-4 feet apart. Water the transplants as soon as they are in the ground. The plants

usually will wilt but will recover in a day or so. Sweet potato plants need watered with at least 1-2 inches of water weekly.

Keeping the area weeded is nearly as important as keeping the ground watered. The less competition the plants have with weeds, the larger the sweet potato will be. The use of pre-emergent garden weed preventer is the easiest method to keep weeds from growing. Mulch is not recommended, because the roots need plenty of heat to stimulate the growth of the sweet potato.

Sweet Potato Harvest

Harvesting usually begins around the time of the first frost in the fall. The roots do not mature, but continue to get larger as the season progresses. The longer you leave the roots the larger your sweet potato will be at harvest (harvest just before or immediately following the first frost).

When harvesting use caution in handling since sweet potatoes can be easily damaged. For long term storage sweet potatoes need to be cured; place the potatoes in a warm (80-90°F) location with high humidity for 5-7 days. After curing, store your sweet potatoes in a location with temperatures of 55 to 60°F.



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