

St. Patrick's Day usually just means making sure you've got your green on and heading out to a local celebration but for many Kansas gardeners, it signals the time to start planting potatoes. But if you're not quite ready to plant yet, don't worry, northwest Kansas usually runs a little later and late March to early April are the suggested planting dates here. Potatoes are the 3rd largest crop produced for human consumption worldwide behind wheat and rice. Potatoes are an excellent source of Vitamin C and a good source of potassium, phosphorus and iron.

When selecting your potatoes to plant, make sure that you get actual seed potatoes that are certified disease free and don't just use older potatoes you've had sitting around the house that have sprouted eyes. The variety you select should be based on your intended preparation method as some are better for making French fries and others are better for mashing or baking.

When preparing potatoes for planting, most seed potatoes can be cut into 4 pieces but make sure each piece has an eye. If you're buying in bulk, figure that most seed potatoes yield about 8-10 seed pieces per pound of seed potatoes. To keep your seed pieces from rotting, freshly cut pieces should be stored at room temperature in fairly high humidity for 5-7 days before planting. This healing process should allow the development of a protective coating on the pieces so they don't decay after being planted. Plant the seed pieces in rows about 3 feet apart but if your garden is smaller, they can be planted closer together. Potatoes do best in a deep, looser soil and should be planted 3-4" deep. When plants start to emerge in a few weeks, firm up the soil surface around the plants and keep up with weed control. It is recommended to control weeds either with shallow hand cultivating or mulching so you don't go too deep and damage any of the growing tubers. Also, as the plants and tubers grow, make sure that the tubers stay covered with soil, adding it to the "hills" as needed. Potatoes exposed to sun can turn green and produce a substance called solanine that can be harmful if eaten.

The amount of water that potatoes need depends on the soil type, temperatures, wind and cultural practices. Normally, potatoes need about 1" of water per week until just before harvest but may need more if conditions are dryer than normal. Regular watering during the growing season will help maintain your yields and the quality of your potatoes.

For maximum yields, it's best to wait until the potato vines are about half dead before you begin harvesting. If desired, you can harvest earlier to get those nice, small new potatoes that go well with your early peas. Potatoes planted in mid-March should be ready to harvest in early to mid-July (just in time for fair). Also, make sure to get the potatoes harvested before the vines are completely dead or the loss of shade can lead to higher soil temperatures than might promote cracking of the potatoes. To prevent sunscald and discoloration, newly harvested potatoes should be protected from the heat, direct sun and wind and then allowed to dry in a warm, shaded, airy location for 3-4 days before storing.

These tips should help you start and produce a successful potato crop this year and if you have any more questions about growing potatoes or other gardening questions, feel free to contact the Rawlins County Extension Office.