



Start Your Garden With Potatoes

Potatoes are the perfect crop to plant in a newly developed vegetable bed.

Whether you've torn up your lawn, reclaimed a bramble-infested garden corner or invested in a pristine macrocarpa raised bed, potatoes will be your new best friends. They tolerate Wellington's typically heavy, clay-rich soil and will thrive if you improve it with digging and compost. Our wind keeps away pests and diseases and the plants' leafy canopy will shade out most weeds. Not only are they amenable, but a bed of potatoes will easily yield more calories than any other crop: regard them as your backyard pantry.

Potatoes first came to New Zealand with European explorers in the late eighteenth century, and it's likely American whalers brought Peruvian native potatoes directly from South America soon afterwards. Maori welcomed those small, knobbly, purple-fleshed tubers, so tolerant of a range of climates, easier to store than kumara and valuable to trade. These are the ancestors of today's Maori potatoes.

A late frost will set back any potato shoots above the soil, so if you're in a frost-prone area of Wellington it's safest to plant them from the beginning of October. They'll get an earlier start if you 'chit' them by putting the



Potato plants mulched with seaweed at Rachel Knight's Ohariu Valley garden

seed potatoes in egg trays, placing them so the end of the potato with the most eyes in it sticks upwards. Leave them to sprout in a cool, light room until the shoots are 2–3cm long, then transplant to your outdoor bed. A 1.2-metre-square bed can take 16 evenly spaced potato tubers. If your seed potatoes are quite large, you can cut them in half just before planting, making sure each half has at least one eye or shoot. Dig a hole and in it place one potato, eyes upwards. The top of the tuber should be 5–10 centimetres below the soil surface. Cover with more soil and top with a 5-centimetre layer of compost or pea straw. Once the shoots appear, mulch between them with seaweed to give each plant its own wind-protecting nest. You don't need to wash or chop the seaweed first. Add another layer of seaweed as the shoots grow taller – it will feed, shelter and keep your potatoes weed-free. It also keeps the sunlight out to stop your potatoes turning green.

Potatoes also grow well in containers. Choose a pot or barrel about 60cm in diameter and at least the same depth. Put a

10cm layer of compost or potting mix in the bottom of your container and space four seed potatoes evenly on top. Cover with another 10cm of compost and water well. Once the shoots are up about 15cm above the surface, add another layer of compost. Keep doing this until you reach the top of the barrel. There will be more space than you think, as the compost will compact between layering. After another week or two you'll find there's space to mulch seaweed or straw between the stems. Don't forget to water containers regularly in dry weather.

Once the potato plants have flowered, poke about under the mulch to see whether it's time to try your 'taties. Even if they're not as big as you'd like, you can snaffle enough for Christmas dinner without disturbing the rest. When you've decided it's time to dig, use a garden fork to lift the roots gently. It's worth going back over the bed a second time as you're bound to find some you've left behind.

I've had success with growing from seed potatoes or from supermarket potatoes. However, seed potatoes are guaranteed virus-free and modern varieties will give you the greatest yield, be most resistant to disease and store well. Experiment with Maori and heritage varieties to experience the range of taste, texture and appearance that home-grown potatoes offer.

My friends say they've never bought potatoes that taste better than the ones I've given them. I could say it's all in the mind, or that it's just because they're fresher than those bought from shops. Possibly it's because they're grown with love. Whatever the reason, doesn't that make you want to taste the potatoes that money can't buy?

Rachel Knight's multi-coloured potato crop

