

It's quite amazing really, since the first week of May I have been enjoying eating the 1st early potato 'Lady Christl'. At the same time we are finishing off 'Harlequin' potatoes from store that were sown and harvested last year. And in Mid May this year I made the last planting of the late main crop potatoes on my allotment.

Personally, I think the potato year starts with preparing the main growing bed in the autumn. This is when I cover the plot with a deep layer of well rotted manure. I find this has the double benefit of providing plenty of humus and nutrients to the soil and it also helps to suppress weed production. Another benefit is that the manure lowers the pH of the soil - ideal for potato growing as they do better in acidic conditions. It also suppresses common scab which causes unsightly blemishes on the skin of the potato, although in essence this does not impair the usability of the potato in the kitchen.

The fun part starts with scanning the seed catalogues to choose which variety of potato to grow. If you are limited on growing space I would limit the choice to the early varieties as these are faster growing than the mid to late types, hence freeing up your ground for other vegetables later in the season. Also, early potatoes in the shops tend to be far more expensive - this year in my local supermarket 'Jersey Royals' were on sale at £4.00 a kilo in May.



Lady Christl, ready for harvest just 10 weeks from planting

Without wishing to sway you in one direction or another when it comes to choosing which variety of potatoes to grow, I will give you a few recommendations. Firstly, super fast developing varieties such as 'Winston' and 'Record' might be quick out of the blocks providing you with potatoes in 8 or 9 weeks from sowing, but the downside is a distinct lack of flavour. Better to choose a slower to develop variety that delivers on taste. If you only have room for one early variety then consider 'Lady Christl'. For a very early crop I sow a dozen tubers in 20 litre buckets in late February. Any decent potting compost will do. These are grown on in my polytunnel and this year we started harvesting new potatoes in early May.

If you have room for a second early then it must be 'Charlotte', this one is tops for taste, has good yields and has justifiably been awarded the AGM by the Royal Horticultural society.

My last two recommendations have been white potato varieties. Now I am going to suggest one of the best introductions in recent times, 'Kestrel'. A beautiful blue eyed 2nd early potato. Fantastic flavour, very good yields, stores well into the New Year and is a consistent winner on the show bench. On the allotments of Britain this potato

has taken over the mantle as the one to grow. And my advice is, if you only have room for one variety, then make it 'Kestrel'.



Beautiful to look at and one of the best to eat. 'Kestrel'

Of course if like me you become a potatoholic then you will never stop at a few varieties, I have been known to grow over 60 varieties in any one year but normally never less than 10.

So another recommendation, if you love your roast potatoes then grow a row of 2nd early 'Catriona'. That is one potato I am never without. It was introduced in 1920 by Scottish potato breeder Archibald Findlay and is still going strong. In the above picture are a row of 'Charlotte' on the left and a young row of 'Catriona' on the right. These were planted out in mid April.

Seed potatoes are available from several sources. You can order direct from a seed producer, like JBA potatoes in Scotland, or your local garden centre, or attend one of the potato days that have become popular in recent years. Whichever source you choose, do make sure that your seed potatoes were produced in Scotland. These hold the highest accreditation for pest and disease control.

At potato days you can get a very wide selection of varieties but be careful of the country of origin. Look for the plant passport on each sack. By law this passport should be on display to the general public.



My favoured way of buying is at my garden centre. I am fortunate in that they stock JBA potatoes so I know I am buying quality Scottish stock. The advantage of this is that you can choose individual tubers that are free from any damage and the right size, 'a large hen's egg' is a good guide.

Once I get my tubers home I set them out in an egg box with eyes uppermost. All they need is somewhere that affords good light and is frost free. In a few weeks the tubers will sprout strong stubby shoots.

In the spring it is time to prepare the ground. I turn in the manure with my cultivator. I then create shallow trenches a spades width wide and in rows one yard apart. Each trench is given a good sprinkle of Vitax organic potato fertiliser at 4oz per yard length. Fish, blood and bone is a good alternative.

For 1st early potatoes dibber shallow holes 12" apart. Place one tuber in each hole and draw the soil back so the potatoes are buried 4" deep. 2nd early potatoes should be spaced at 15" apart.

I make my first outdoor planting around early April but you must consider the weather conditions that prevail in your area.

Earth up the growing stems 'haulms' when 9" high. This creates extra growing area for the developing tubers, it also aerates the soil and helps keep down weeds.

One other advantage of only growing 1st and 2nd early potatoes is that they often escape the blight. This destructive disease destroys the haulms of the plants and stops tuber production. By growing early varieties, if the disease does strike your tubers are already formed and consequently you will have a crop to harvest.

Keep the plants well watered and you can look forward to a bumper crop of delicious new potatoes.

John Trim