



A12 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 started is easy. Detailed instructions follow for preparing tubers, planting and looking after your crop.

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 next page
- 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 on the next page, adapting as required for your chosen containers, varieties, and time of year.

Extended activities

Celebrate the harvest, cook something delicious with your crop and invite people for a potato-themed event, including the school caterers (see A1).

Top tip 

Choosing varieties

Generally 'early' potatoes are better for containers. They produce less foliage and quicker harvests than late/'maincrop' potatoes.

Choose a variety that does not produce large tubers.

See Food Growing Instruction Cards and Organic Garden Catalogue (www.organiccatalog.com) for suggestions.

Health & Safety	Be careful when handling containers and emptying soil to harvest potatoes. See Manual Handling and back care (B3.4). Follow safe practice for handling soil, eg cover open wounds, wear gloves if necessary, wash hands; keep tetanus vaccinations up to date, etc. <i>See also Health and Safety Guidelines (Section B3.3)</i>
Further information	A1 Hosting an annual event A11 Planting in containers B4.6 Growing in containers Food Growing Instruction Cards (Potatoes)

Instructions for growing potatoes in containers

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.

- 1 'Chit' tubers to encourage sturdy green sprouts. This is not essential, but gives 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. Roll down compost bags. Unroll these later as plants grow taller and add extra growing medium.



- 3 For growing medium, mix 50:50:
 - Compost - home-made (B5.7) or bought organic, peat-free potting compost
 - Topsoil - bought (the best quality sold as 'loam') or from a spare pile in your garden digging out paths (A17) or a stack of rotten grass turves (A15)



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



- 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 30-40cm 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.
- Water frequently, especially when the plants are flowering and tubers are forming.
- Feed every three weeks with an organic concentrated feed eg comfrey liquid (see B4.4).



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 (see A32).

