Potatoes are a rewarding crop if you have room in your garden. Each plant takes up to four square feet of garden space, with vines growing to about two feet high. For each pound of seed potatoes planted, the average yield is about ten pounds of potatoes.

Potatoes can be planted from mid-March through June. Potatoes for winter storage should be planted later than those for summer use. Choose a sunny location with a light, sandy, well-draining soil. A poor-draining soil often yields deformed tubers. *If you do attempt to grow potatoes in a heavier soil, follow these suggestions: Remove 3” of soil from the row and loosen the soil in the bottom. Water the row well and let dry 2 to 3 days. Place 2”- 3” of compost or organic matter in the row, lay in the seed potatoes, and cover with 3” of soil. DO NOT USE MANURE OR LIME IN THE SOIL WHERE YOU ARE PLANTING POTATOES.*

When plants are 12” high, work a good organic vegetable fertilizer into the soil at the rate recommended on the package.

Certified seed potatoes and mini-tubers can be purchased from garden centers. These have been inspected, are relatively disease-free, and are generally better yielding. Commercial potatoes from the grocery store are usually treated to prevent sprouting. Organic grocery store potatoes may be used, however they are often lower-yielding. Similarly, saving your own potatoes and replanting will usually result in diminishing harvests as viruses build up in your stock.

A potato seed is simply a mini tuber (cultured small potato) or a cut piece of a larger one. Using mini tubers (or bulk potatoes small enough to be planted whole) reduces the risk of losing newly-planted stock to rot or fungus attacking cut surfaces. You can “chit” potato tubers (pre-sprout for faster growth) by placing them eye end up in trays or egg boxes in a light, cool, frost-free area to start sprouting before you plant.

When using larger seed potatoes, prepare the (chitted) tubers for planting by cutting them into small pieces weighing 1 – 2 ounces (about egg-sized) with two or more good eyes. These pieces are left to dry, usually overnight. Plant the seed potatoes 4” deep and 15” apart. Keep the rows 2 ½ feet apart. If planting cut seed potato pieces, place cut side down. Otherwise, place sprout side up.

Irrigation usually begins when the plants are 5” high. Moisture must be maintained throughout the season. Periods of dryness will cause the tubers to become knobby. The potatoes form between the seed piece and the soil surface. For this reason cultivation for weeds must be shallow and soil must be scraped from between the rows up to the plants to cover the maturing potatoes (hilling). This practice should be continued during the season. This protects the potatoes from the sun and makes it easy to harvest potatoes at the end of the season.
Another method is to mound up straw around the stem of the plant instead of soil. This also protects the potatoes from the sun and harvesting can be done by simply reaching into the straw. In the fall, work the straw into the soil to provide organic matter.

**With either method, the foliage should never be covered.**

For people with less garden space, potato planter bags or potato tubs are a great option. These can be unrolled or pulled up and filled as the plants grow. Start by putting 6” of Dr. Earth Vegetable Planting Mix, Gardner & Bloome Raised Bed & Potting Mix, or a good potting soil (choose one with added nutrients or plan to add your own) in the bottom of the bag, add the potatoes, spaced 3-4” apart, and cover with 3” more of potting soil or compost. Then “hill” by filling the planter bag up as the potato vines grow.

Potatoes are subject to attack by several insects- aphids, flea beetles, Colorado potato beetles, leafhoppers, and mites. Late blight, characterized by water-soaked spots, which enlarge and turn brown and black, is the most common potato disease. Both late blight and early blight can be minimized by keeping irrigation water off the foliage and by removing infected vines at the end of the season, about 7 -- 10 days before harvest. If insects or disease have been a problem in your yard, please consult a Sky Nursery expert.

Harvest ‘new’ potatoes any time after the plants flower. ‘New’ potatoes are any potato harvested before full maturity. New potatoes are smaller and more tender but do not store as well as mature potatoes. Early varieties are often grown principally to harvest as new potatoes. Harvest by loosening the soil around the plant and gently removing the largest tubers, leaving the smaller ones to grow on. In general, new potatoes can be harvested about 90 days after planting.

Mature potatoes should be harvested about two weeks after the vines have begun to die down (usually about 120 days after planting). This allows the tubers to mature and the skins to thicken for better storage. Use a shovel to loosen the soil and remove the potatoes, being careful not to bruise the skin. Let the potatoes dry, unwashed, 2 – 3 days, to cure the skins further for better storage.

Store only well matured tubers free from defects. Set aside any small, scraped, or bruised potatoes for immediate use. Potatoes are best stored in a dark, cool (40 to 50 degrees) area. Check them periodically and remove any tubers that show signs of spoiling.