

It's time to plant potatoes. They're one of the easiest vegetables to grow. Several years ago Ciscoe Morris shared his secret of "How to Grow Potatoes in a Container." Here's his secret recipe.

Get a clean garbage can or similar container. Plastic works great because it won't rust out. Drainage is absolutely necessary. Drill several holes in the bottom. It also helps to drill some holes in the side about half an inch up from the bottom of the container.

Fill the container with about 4 inches of good potting soil. Mix in about a handful of Osmocote 14-14-14 fertilizer. Osmocote is a slow release fertilizer that will stay active for approximately two and a half months. (Note: After that time, fertilize with a good water-soluble fertilizer such as Miracle Grow about every two weeks according to directions on the label). Place whole seed potatoes in the soil. There should be about five inches between potatoes. Cover with an additional inch or so of soil. All potatoes should be completely covered with soil. Water the spuds in.

The potatoes will begin to grow. When the vines reach four inches, cover all but one inch with compost or straw. It makes it easy to reach in to pick potatoes. Every time the vines grow another four inches keep covering all but the top inch. Eventually the vines will grow out of the top of the container. By now the whole container will be filled with compost. Soon the vines will flower. Not long after that the vines will begin to produce potatoes all along the covered portions.

Once the potatoes become big enough you can reach in and pick a few for dinner any time you want. These spuds are called "new potatoes." They won't keep long, so pick them and eat them. After the vines die back at the end of the summer, the potatoes remaining are storing potatoes. You can pick them and store them as you normally would. They will keep well as long as they are stored in a dark, cool and relatively dry location.

All during the growing period make sure to provide adequate water. You don't want to drown the plants but it's also important that the soil at the bottom never dries out. In late summer your potatoes may need to be watered on a daily basis. Use a watering can to water to avoid wetting the foliage. Ciscoe says this method of growing spuds is really fun. You get lots of them without using much space and it amazes visitors to your yard.

A master gardener who tried Ciscoe's potato secret said he'd mix potting soil in with the compost as the container is filled. In his experiment using Ciscoe's method the water ran down the sides of the garbage can making the bottom too wet and the top and sides too dry. The master gardener recommends using a half and half mixture of potting soil and compost.

We tried this method at the Raab Park Youth Garden and at the same time planted potatoes in a hill. At home my husband and I tried Ciscoe's recipe and only got enough spuds for one meal, but we planted very late in the season (June). We're definitely trying again this year (but will plant in April). Also don't be afraid to pack the potatoes into the can, you only need five inches between the potatoes. We had fairly good results at Raab Park but didn't put nearly enough potatoes in the can.

Most nurseries, Central Market in Poulsbo, Sacks Feed and many other garden and feed centers have seed potatoes now. You can also use organic potatoes from your local grocery. Don't use non-organic potatoes which are sometimes treated with a non-sprouting agent so they won't work for home gardening. Try Yellow Finn, Fingerling or Russet.

To plant directly in your garden soil find an area that is relatively free of rocks. If your seed potatoes are large you'll need to cut them into pieces (about four to six pieces per potato). Be sure each section has two or more eyes (eyes look like small dimples or indentations). Put these segments on a cookie sheet or paper towel on your kitchen counter so the cut part heals over. Overnight works fine. Plant the segments about six inches deep. As the vines emerge cover them with more soil or with straw. Remember that the potatoes grow along the vines. Potatoes are easy to grow. The only disadvantage is that they can take up quite a bit of room and need to be rotated to another part of your garden each year to prevent blight. Once you plant them they often pop up again in unexpected places. This fall you'll enjoy wonderfully tasty homegrown potatoes.

Send questions or comments to Peg at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.