

Growing Potatoes
Marlow Shubert
Angelina Master Gardener

Potatoes are a cool season crop, planted in Angelina County in mid-February through mid-March. Traditionally, potatoes are planted by "President's Day". This year gardeners will need to wait until the ground dries from the recent heavy rains, or the ground will be too wet to till and the seed potatoes will rot. Raised beds and containers will dry out sooner, allowing gardeners to get the potatoes planted a little earlier than in ground level beds.

Why grow potatoes, anyway? Well, let's see. They taste good. They can be prepared in so many different ways. They are a "staple" of so many meals. Without potatoes, there would be no French fries, no mashed potatoes, no potato chips, no hash browns, etc.

Potatoes are easy to grow and they like a loose, loamy soil. Potatoes are a "root crop"; so loose soil will make it easier for them to spread and grow. If you don't have a loose soil, till in compost or mulch to "loosen" the soil, and provide nutrients. Make sure you till all additives in well. Soil preparation is extremely important for potatoes and all vegetables.

Purchase "seed potatoes" from a local nursery. Potatoes from the grocery store are usually sprayed to prevent them from sprouting and should not be used. You will notice "eyes", or small indentations, and some of the seed potatoes may have sprouts. These "eyes" are where the sprouts, or your plants will come from.

Next, cut the potato into pieces, with 2 eyes or more left on each piece. After cutting spread the potatoes out for 3 days to let the cut seal over. You can also coat them in lime before letting them set for a day or two.

Now, you are ready to plant. Till the soil again, especially if it has rained, mixing in a small amount of fertilizer. Plant the potato pieces 4 inches deep, and a foot apart, in rows at least 24 inches apart. If you have raised beds, the potatoes can be planted closer. The plants should come up in a week or two, depending on the soil temperature. The soil should not be too wet, or the potato pieces will rot before sprouting.

After your plants are up several inches, turn the soil in to the plant on each side, making sure to not cover the entire plant. The plant will "root" under the soil, and produce more potatoes. As the plants grow add fertilizer to each side of the plant, lightly work into the soil and water in well.

When the potatoes are big enough to eat there will be cracks in the ground, under the plant, about 60 to 90 days after planting. When the plants start withering and dying, it is time to dig the potatoes. Use a shovel, NOT a TILLER, and dig well below and beside the plant, or you will miss some potatoes. Good luck, and now enjoy the rewards of your labor.