You CAN Grow Potatoes in Escambia County
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These cold winter days make gardeners yearn for the warmth of April to be able to get their vegetable garden started, but they needn’t wait so long. Late January through February are ideal times for establishing some potatoes in the garden. When you are eating YOUR home-grown, fresh potatoes in May, you won’t even think of that day you braved a cold, brisk wind and drizzly skies to get your potatoes planted.

For those not familiar with growing potatoes, you don’t plant the typical seed to get more of the wonderful vegetable. What growers call “seed” is actually a portion cut from a potato tuber that has an active growing point called the “eye”. Many gardeners plant seed potatoes that they cut themselves from potatoes purchased at grocery stores, but it is better to purchase seed potatoes that have been certified. Certification ensures that the seed tubers are free of disease. You can usually purchase seed at farm and garden supply stores in our area, and you can usually order seed. If you are unsure of where you can buy the seed, call the Extension office.

Before you plant any new crop, a soil test should be taken to determine soil fertility. Based on University of Florida fertilizer recommendations, about 0.75 lbs of nitrogen(N) and about 0.5 lbs of potassium(K) are required per 100 feet of row at planting. This is roughly equivalent to 7.5 lb of a 10-0-10 complete fertilizer at each application. The remaining nitrogen and potassium fertilizer (0.75 lb N and 0.5 lbs K per 100 ft of row) should be placed in a band about four to six inches to either side of the plant approximately three to four weeks after planting. The fertilizer should be buried about two inches deep.

Potatoes prefer to grow in a soil a little more acidic than other vegetables. Keep your soil pH in a range of 5.5 to 6.0 where your potatoes will be added. Scab disease may be a problem if your soil is too alkaline, resulting is corky tissue on the surface of your potatoes. If your soil is too alkaline, you may consider a raised garden or raised container for potatoes.

Mark the day you plant your seeds on the calendar. You will need to keep track of the age of your young potatoes. Plants should be spaced at about 6-8” within the row with at least 36” between rows. Seed pieces should be planted 4” below the soil surface. Seed pieces should be planted with the cut side down and eyes (or sprouts) facing up. Hilling is the act of adding soil to the top of the potato row. Since the seed piece was only planted 4” below the soil surface, there is the possibility that new potatoes will push up above the soil surface. Add about two or three inches of additional soil on the potato row when the sprout emerges from the soil (the sprout generally emerges around ten days to two weeks after planting). Soil can be moved from the furrows between rows and used for hilling.
You may also try planting your seed pieces above ground in a barrel or cage. Place your seed pieces just below the soil and add several inches of straw over the soil. When the potato leaves have grown about 6 inches, cover them with another several inches of straw. Make sure that about an inch or so of leaves remain above the straw and can receive light to make food for the plant. Keep adding straw for about 3 more times at each resulting 6 inches of potato stem and leaf growth. Make sure you add moisture as needed if the area is not receiving rainfall. This old-time method of growing potatoes allows for easier digging when the potatoes are ready for harvest. Examples of different growing techniques are shown on next page.

Once you have your potatoes up and growing, you should see gradual growth of the vines. If we continue to have very cold temperatures, you might have to provide frost/freeze protection for the plants. Plants that are smaller than four to six inches can be covered with more soil if freezing temperatures are forecast. You can also cover them with fabric. Some people loosely mound hay over young plants and move the hay to the furrow when temperatures improve.

Should you start to see distortions in the leaves (from an insect, animal, or disease), don’t hesitate to contact your Escambia County Extension office. We can help you determine the cause of the problems and often provide a solution.

Potatoes that grow well here are usually mature and ready for harvest 80-115 days after planting. Home gardeners who will be consuming their potatoes within a month or two can dig up their potatoes when they are ready, being careful to limit damage to the tuber when using tools. Most people don’t grow enough potatoes to be concerned with storing them for long periods of time, but if you do, please contact the Escambia County Extension office to learn more about how to keep potato tubers.

For more information about growing potatoes in the Home Garden, please visit this website: [http://escambia.ifas.ufl.edu/agriculture/HS18300.pdf](http://escambia.ifas.ufl.edu/agriculture/HS18300.pdf). As always, you can contact any of the people listed below at the Escambia Co. Extension office for more details or to answer any of your growing questions.

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Adapted from: EDIS HS 933, “Growing Potatoes in the Florida Home Garden”
You can grow potatoes in containers, or you can be creative and recycle. Pictured here is a tire system. With this method, the grower adds tires and fills in the cavity with more soil when the plants need to be hilled. To harvest, cut out the vines, and move the tires off of each other.

Consider using hay in the furrows—it can be used to cover young, tender plants during a frost and will be a good mulch to keep down weeds.

An experimental method of growing potatoes in the Escambia County Extension vegetable garden: hollowed-out straw bales and compost to avoid nematodes. Check back in April to see how the experiment works out.