



You don't need a vegetable plot or allotment to grow your own potatoes – many are quite happy to grow in containers, insists potato expert **Alan Romans**. Photography by Tim Sandall

# FRESH FROM THE POT

**OFTEN I AM ASKED** 'Can I grow potatoes in containers?' The answer is yes, and for those with limited time and space, potatoes are perfect in pots. They give a larger return for effort in volume and quality of food than any other crop.

There is also something particularly satisfying about growing potatoes on the patio. The colours, textures and taste are at their best, for the tubers could not be fresher, and are usually blemish free. It is even reasonably cost effective, particularly if more expensive salad or speciality cultivars are chosen. For best results, take time to consider cultivation needs and cultivar choice.

## Cultivating patio potatoes

- **Container choice:** pots or growing bags are suitable, of 25cm diameter or more with drainage holes and ideally 45–60cm depth. I cannot recommend potato barrels: they are expensive, and in my experience adding layers of compost as the plant grows from near the bottom to mimic 'earthing up' does not succeed in pots. Tuber growth more or less stops in a layer when the next layer is added, and although new tubers do develop in this, as more compost is added its weight squeezes out the air and creates anaerobic conditions at the bottom. Waterlogged tubers can then become misshapen and cankerous. Far better to fill a pot once, and top up only if tubers poke out – potatoes turn green in light, becoming bitter and poisonous.
- **Compost:** though this can be contentious (peat-based? peat-free? topsoil?), potatoes are not fussy, so the choice is essentially up to you.



- **Planting:** in 1600, French soil scientist Olivier de Serres stated potatoes should be planted 'four fingers breadths deep' – which is still valid advice. Space them about 25–30cm apart as container size allows. Fill the pot with at least 15cm of compost, rest tubers on the surface, and top up with a similar depth of compost.
- **Density:** two tubers are enough for most pots. The total yield from a given pot tends to be about the same however many seed potatoes are planted: fewer produce a smaller number of large tubers, while denser planting will result in more but smaller tubers. Chitting (sprouting) is unnecessary, although it will produce a slightly earlier crop.
- **Siting:** potatoes crop best given full sun and a sheltered position.
- **Watering:** be guided by the weather, but the rule for watering is 'little and often', as potatoes like even moisture and react badly to drought. Avoid water-logging, however. In hot spells, in full growth, daily watering may be required.
- **Feeding:** apply a liquid feed high in potash once or twice a week. Tomatoes (*Solanum lycopersicum*) are close relatives of potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*) and

share similar nutritional requirements so tomato feed is ideal.

- **Harvesting:** early potato cultivars should mature in 100–120 days (13 weeks), maincrops 125–140 days (up to 20 weeks). Earlies can be lifted when flowering begins; scrape the compost aside to check they are ready. Earlies also have the advantage of rarely being affected by blight. If the foliage of maincrops shows blackening caused by blight, cut the foliage down to 5cm above the compost level and leave for two weeks before harvesting.

## Cultivar choice

There are about 180 potato cultivars available in the UK, many of them sold as seed potatoes in small quantities. Any can be pot grown, but the most popular are salads and earlies. 'Swift' is a good choice: quick to grow, disease resistant and with short, easily managed foliage. Its tubers are delicious fresh, at a time when store-bought potatoes are tired from prolonged cool storage.

'Mimi' is perhaps the ultimate pot potato, producing bountiful small, round, red, early salad tubers. It is so

compact it will grow in a 20cm pot. My favourite, 'Duke of York', takes 10 days longer to mature but also has beautiful red skin, striking blue-centred foliage and a strong flavour. A little later still is 'Smile', also red with a prominent white smile around each eye.

Specialist salad cultivars are among the most popular pot potatoes. My favourite is 'Maris Peer', often dismissed because it is so common in shops, but is beautiful with strong purple flowers.

European Union rules have now been relaxed to allow the sale of 'conservation' vegetable cultivars. The heritage potatoes among these tend to be coloured novelties or of historic significance, and are available as 'Approved Stock' or as new, laboratory-grown minitubers. Many are ideal for pots.

Growing potatoes in pots is extremely rewarding. With the range of cultivars available always on the increase, I am sure that container-grown spuds will become ever more popular. ■

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## ALAN'S SUGGESTED POTS FOR POTS

**Earlies:** 'ultra earlies' that crop first are 'Accent', 'Lady Christl', 'Ulster Chieftain', 'Maris Bard' and 'Orla'. Consider also: 'Duke of York', 'Arran Pilot', 'Foremost', 'Sharpes Express', 'Epicure' and 'Pentland Javelin' (plant in March, but cover on cold nights; ideally start off in a frost-free place)

**Salads:** 'Charlotte', 'Nicola', 'Belle de Fontenay', 'Roseval', 'Ratte', 'Aura', and 'BF15' are all classic, high-quality salads with good foliage. 'Anya', 'Harlequin' and 'Moulin Rouge' – modern cultivars bred from 'Pink Fir Apple' – are worth considering

**Heritage:** 'Salad Blue' and 'Highland Burgundy Red' are full of antioxidants, while 'Shetland Black' is heavy-duty crofter fuel. 'Fortyfold' is probably the original potato of Lancashire hotpot

**FRESHEST CROP** To grow potatoes in pots, choose a fairly deep container (above and opposite). Earlies and salad-potato cultivars are popular, but a wide selection can be grown for harvesting at their peak