

TOP OF THE POTS

Space to grow a good number of potatoes is often limited, but an RHS Plant Trial in 2013 assessed the best early and salad potato cultivars for growing in containers

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Potatoes have a wide range of planting times (from February to May), maturities (first earlies, second earlies, early main-crop and maincrop), and culinary uses (boiling, salad, roast, jacket, chips, mash). Since I joined what was the RHS Vegetable Trials Sub-committee in 1995, there have been a number of RHS Plant Trials of potatoes – first earlies and salad cultivars in 1998 and 2003, and earlies in 2007 – but all grown directly in the soil.

The 2013 trial was therefore the first to assess first earlies and salad potato cultivars grown in containers (rather than in the ground). This method is increasingly popular because it makes potato growing achievable whatever the size of garden. Success or failure seems to be based primarily on container size, husbandry and cultivar choice.

Choosing cultivars

This trial was assessed at both RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey and RHS Garden Hyde Hall, Essex. The RHS Vegetable Trials Assessment Forum selected 21 cultivars, from popular 'Charlotte' and 'Lady Christl' to relatively recent 'Golden Nugget' and 'Casablanca'. These were 'chitted' (left to sprout) in the propagation house from week commencing 11 February 2013, and then planted into containers on 2 and 3 April.

Potatoes in patio bags

Five tubers of each cultivar were planted in generic 40-litre patio bags (equivalent to a 16in pot) at Hyde Hall; two bags of each cultivar were planted at Wisley. No potatoes were grown in soil at either site as a comparison. Once the patio bags had been filled with 20 litres of peat-free compost with 125g (4½oz) of organic potato fertiliser incorporated, the tubers were spaced evenly and sunk into the compost. As the haulms (stems) developed, the bags were gradually filled with more compost.

One bag of each cultivar (except 'Ambassador') was grown and assessed at the newly developed vegetable area at Hyde Hall. >>>

Potato 'International Kidney' grown in a patio bag (below) at RHS Garden Hyde Hall.



Awards for bag-grown potatoes



A trial of 21 potato cultivars was held at RHS Garden Wisley and RHS Garden Hyde Hall; eight received the RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM). Entries were judged by the RHS Vegetable Trials Assessment Forum for taste, texture, yield, appearance, resistance to pests and diseases, earliness and uniformity. See p72 for suppliers.

Cultivars receiving AGMs:

1 'Casablanca': clean, shallow-eyed, white-skinned, waxy white-fleshed tubers of a regular size. Suppliers: A, B, C, D, E, G, H.

2 'Golden Nugget': uniform, small, gold-skinned, round tubers, firm waxy flesh with superb flavour. (Award subject to availability).

3 'Sharpe's Express': a cultivar dating from 1900 which performed excellently. White-skinned, oval tubers with cream, floury flesh with a lovely taste that lingers. Care needed to avoid disintegration on cooking. Suppliers: A, B, G.

4 'Maris Bard': an older 'early' cultivar released in 1972 and its earliness now superseded by 'Rocket' and 'Swift', but performed well in bags. White-skinned and white/cream, waxy flesh. Suppliers: A, B, E, F, G, H.

5 'Lady Christl' (1998 AGM reconfirmed): early crop, uniform size, yellow skin and flesh. No disintegration when cooked, good texture and taste. Suppliers: A, B, E, G.

6 'Jazzy': visually appealing, oval, shallow-eyed, yellow-skinned and fleshed waxy tubers. Sweet taste. (Award subject to availability).

7 'Vales Emerald' (2007 AGM reconfirmed): even crop of good size for salad. Buttery yellow flesh; skins are easily removed. Suppliers: A.

8 'Charlotte' (1998 AGM reconfirmed): uniform size, yellow-skinned and waxy tubers. A good show cultivar. Suppliers: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H.



Potatoes grown in bags at RHS Garden Wisley as part of the trial.



Success with potatoes in patio bags

Growing in patio bags is a popular, space-saving way of raising potatoes. As a general rule, each tuber needs eight litres of compost to produce good results, hence five tubers were planted in 40-litre bags for the RHS trial. Exhibitors often plant a single tuber of all showbench-quality cultivars of earlies and maincrops in 14-litre black polybags. I have seen examples where one 'Charlotte' or 'Maris Peer' tuber grown in an 8-litre bag will produce many marble-sized tubers.

- ❖ **Maximising yield:** to get the best possible yield, some gardeners have tried a new technique. Fill one-third of the potato bag with compost, lay out three tubers, cover with another third of compost and place a further two tubers, then fill almost to the brim with compost.
- ❖ **Watering regime:** the most important factor for success is keeping compost moist but not saturated, especially for the first six weeks until the plant is well established. This minimises the risk of starving developing tubers of oxygen, which results in lots of 'pinheads' where tubers failed to develop. As the plants grow, watering can be increased – especially during warmer weather.
- ❖ **Feed:** potatoes need nitrogen when first planted, but then high potash is required for most of their growing period.
- ❖ **Container:** experiment with container sizes and spacing of tubers.

Judging at Wisley

On 26 June, one bag of each cultivar was harvested, weighed and assessed. The Assessment Forum marked tubers for their flavour, texture, discoloration after cooking (if any) and overall appearance.

In hindsight it would have been useful to record numbers rather than weight, so when the remaining bag of each cultivar was assessed on 10 July, we recorded tuber numbers in addition to weight (see table, right).

Results at Hyde Hall

I visited RHS Garden Hyde Hall on 11 July to assess tuber numbers and quality compared to those at RHS Garden Wisley. Results for each cultivar proved similar, except for a noticeable difference for 'Golden Nugget' with a disappointing 34 tubers and 'Sharpe's Express', which performed much better than at

Wisley with 69 mid-sized tubers and 28 tiny ones. Of the cultivars trialled, 'Vales Emerald' (110 tubers), 'Sharpe's Express' (97), and 'Elisabeth' (97) produced the most tubers. 'Foremost' was the only cultivar showing common scab (*Streptomyces scabies*). Following the Forum's assessment of all cultivars trialled, we recommended the RHS Award of Garden Merit be awarded to five cultivars (two subject to availability) and reconfirmed the existing AGM of three others (see pp70–71)

Consumers are enticed by pre-packed bags of 'baby potatoes' on supermarket shelves, yet they are easily grown at home in containers and bags, with no restrictions set by what space is available – site them on patios or balconies. By choosing a suitable cultivar, you could enjoy delicious potatoes as fresh as they come this summer. ●

Harvesting records

All of the potato cultivars trialled had their yields weighed; for the final harvesting at Wisley tubers were also counted. Below are some of the results (1 kg = 2.205lb).

	Total weight in kg	Total weight in kg	Number of tubers
	June	July	July
'Accent'	1.5	2.1	26
'Accord'	1.5	2.28	32
'Casablanca'	1.6	2.34	53
'Charlotte'	1.2	1.9	48
'Golden Nugget'	1.1	2.1	80
'Jazzy'	1.1	2.25	90
'Lady Christl'	1.75	2.54	70
'Maris Bard'	1.7	2.15	52
'Maris Peer'	1.65	2.34	35
'Sharpe's Express'	1.45	2.45	66

SUPPLIER DETAILS

- A** Thompson & Morgan: 0844 248 5383; www.thompson-morgan.com
- B** Marshalls: 0844 557 6700; www.marshalls-seeds.co.uk
- C** Suttons Seeds: 0844 922 0606; www.suttons.co.uk
- D** Dobies: 0844 701 7625; www.dobies.co.uk
- E** DT Brown: 0845 371 0532; www.dtbrownseeds.co.uk
- F** Unwins: 0844 573 8400; www.unwins.co.uk
- G** Kings Seeds: 01376 570000; www.kingsseeds.com
- H** Mr Fothergill's: 0845 371 0518; www.mr-fothergills.co.uk

More from the RHS For more on growing potatoes and other crops in containers, search 'Vegetables in containers' at www.rhs.org.uk

Stock up on seed potatoes at RHS London Show

The inaugural **RHS London Potato Days** will be held at the **RHS London Plant and Design Show** on Friday 21 and Saturday 22 February (see pp88-89).

Visitors to the event can choose from a range of seed potatoes, as well as onion and shallot sets. Pennard Plants and other exhibitors will be on hand to advise on the best cultivars to suit your requirements, while chefs will prepare chips, mash and other dishes in the 'ultimate potato taste test'.