

Think of potatoes ... NOW!

This year, c. two million primary school children in the UK will take part in a very large school-based growing project called *Grow Your Own Potatoes* in order to get children acquainted with every aspect of this useful vegetable. See growyourownpotatoes.org.uk.

Wouldn't it be amazing if every school in Ireland got involved in something similar! A school garden is not necessary for growing potatoes. All a teacher requires is a small budget (c. €30) to buy some growing containers, compost or manure or vegetable compost and soil and early seed potatoes.

Potatoes are wonderful. Crammed with vitamins and minerals such as vitamin C, thiamine, folic acid and potassium, eating them regularly ensures a balanced diet. Contrary to some beliefs, they are not high in fat.

When starting a school garden, it is often a good idea to grow potatoes with every class to generate confidence in growing. It is difficult to fail with this venture!

However, timing is everything. The potato year begins in late January/early February with the chitting of first earlies. Chitting potatoes at this time of year gives them a head-start and ensures a harvest in June.

Buy certified seed potatoes from the local garden centre or online – 2.5 kg is sufficient for one class. There are many varieties nowadays but it is hard to beat the tried and trusted Home Guard. However, it is worth trying out a variety in the school and comparing taste in June.

Open the bag immediately after purchase and place them with the side having most 'eyes' upwards in egg cartons. 'Eyes' are the buds or growing points on the tuber and from these sprouts grow. Place the egg cartons containing the seed potatoes in a part of

the classroom that is not near a radiator or getting full sun such as a window sill. Do nothing more with them until they are well-sprouted around mid-March. See www.schoolearthed.ie/paddys-school-garden/video-feb-seed-potatoes.html

Decide now what type of container you are going to use to grow the potatoes. If you have a raised bed, lay a 10cm deep mulch of school-made compost or manure or vegetable compost on top of it now and cover with black polythene. From now until March the earthworms will work on this, turning it into lovely fine humus and also feeding and aerating the soil in the process. This is the 'no-dig' gardening approach in action and it's becoming very fashionable!

If you don't have a raised bed you could use either strong hessian sacks or potato planters. Be forewarned! Thin, cheap hessian sacks are useless because they will rot. Excellent recycled sacks can be obtained from ReCreate in Ballymount, Dublin. Teachers can access a huge range of materials here for art and projects after payment of a small membership fee. See www.recreate.ie

Planters are available from garden centres, some hardware stores and online. See www.thegardenshop.ie or www.quickcrop.ie for examples, but shop around for best value! Planters and bags only take four seed potatoes so you will need approximately six for your 2.kg of seeds.

Around St Patrick's Day is the traditional time to sow early potatoes in Ireland. When you are ready, place small drainage stones or pieces of broken earthenware pots in the bottom of the planter or bag and fill to 10cm-15cm deep

with either multipurpose compost, multipurpose compost plus soil, school compost plus soil. To conserve bogs some growers always use peat-free, multi-purpose compost.

If you wish you could use the bags or planters to set up a fair test in the garden. See www.schoolearthed.ie/paddys-school-garden/video-mar-potato-growth.html for instructions on how to do this.

Place four potatoes on the growing medium and cover with roughly 10 cm of medium. Water and leave to drain before placing the containers in a sunny place.

If you are growing in a prepared raised bed sow the seeds with their sprouting end upwards in holes c. 10-5cm deep and 30 cm apart. (Use two sticks and twine to get a straight line). The rows should be 45cm apart. That means that you will manage to sow two rows (or c.12 seeds) in a conventional 2m x 1m bed. See www.schoolearthed.ie/paddys-school-garden/video-mar-early-potatoes.html for video on sowing and also www.quickcrop.ie/learning/video/potatoes.

When the potato stalks in the containers reach 10cm, fill around them with more of the growing medium and continue doing this until the medium is c. 5cm from the top of the container. This process is called 'earthing-up the potatoes' and ensures bigger yields and prevents potatoes from turning green which renders them poisonous. If you are using a bed, earth up around the stalks. This process will result in a V-shaped mound. If frost threatens in the meantime, cover the plants with fleece which can be obtained in a hardware store or garden centre.

Keep the plants watered but don't overwater. The growing medium should



Potatoes growing in Scoil Mochua, Celbridge, Co Kildare.



Sprouting potatoes. Photo: Laura O'Hare.



Dig for potatoes in June.



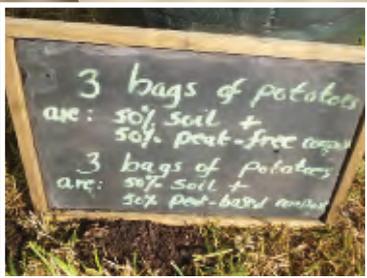
be damp but not saturated in water.

When the flowers fade on the stalks in June, the potatoes can be lifted. See growyourownpotatoes.org.uk, www.potato.ie and www.bordbia.ie for excellent ideas on cooking the potatoes and also www.potato.ie/recipe-categories/new-potato-recipes. Have a potato party in the school! The former website has lots of background information on potatoes, lesson plans, worksheets, PowerPoints, recipes, videos etc.

When the potatoes are harvested, sunflowers or hardy annuals can be planted or sown in the empty bed in order to suppress weeds over the summer holidays. The sunflower plants should be grown indoors in May in biodegradable pots made from toilet roll or paper towel cardboard tubes.

Compost the stalks if your potatoes are disease-free.

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Potato fair test, varying soil and weighing results



Results of potato growing fair-test 2014

Growing medium	Grms
Soil sand peat-free soil	1525
Soil sand dung	400
Soil sand home-made compost	1025
Soil sand (control)	250
Soil sand peat-based compost	1150

