

PRE-PACKED RHUBARB

There is little more appealing in early spring than a sweet Rhubarb pie or crumble. You can buy plants in pots that you just plant out into the allotment, garden or vegetable patch. However, it is also available as a crown in bags, similar to the picture above, from October through until the summer. This tends to be better value.

It is vitally important that Rhubarb does not get waterlogged in winter. If your soil is not free draining add plenty of grit to the soil or plant it in a pot. Pots should be at least 18 inches (45cm) in depth. Add pebbles to the base of the pot then fill it with a free draining compost such as *Vitax Q4 multi-purpose*. The crown should be planted with the roots at the bottom and with the top of the crown two inches above the surface of the soil.

You should mulch rhubarb yearly in February with a thin layer of *composted manure* and feed it with a couple of handfuls of multi-purpose fertiliser such as *Growmore*. However, you should never cover the top of the crown entirely.

You should not harvest rhubarb in the year that you plant it. In future years you can harvest stems from the plant by "pulling" them clean away from the crown. The leafy top part should be cut off and composted as only the stem is edible.

To get your rhubarb ready to harvest earlier it is possible, from year four, to "force it." This means covering it with an upturned bucket or dustbin. This will give you stems ready to pull three weeks earlier than usual.

During the growing period Rhubarb should be kept moist but not wet. Rhubarb can be harvested from March until Early July. After this period the stems become bitter in taste and should be allowed to grow and die off naturally. The dead stems and leaves can be removed and composted.

Rhubarb is very hardy to frost and often the harder the winter the better the Rhubarb harvest is.

ONION, SHALLOT & GARLIC

Onions and shallots require a sunny sheltered position with well-drained soil. Summer varieties are best planted between February and early May. Whilst Autumn planting varieties are best planted between September and late November. Onions and shallots can be grown in two ways:

- From seed: Propagated indoors first, before planting outside
- From sets: These are small immature onions. Once planted out they increase in size and hopefully develop into examples looking similar to those you can buy in the supermarkets

Garlic is usually grown from cloves:

- The cloves are created by separating them from the main bulb

It is possible to grow onions, shallots and garlic in two ways. In open ground such as an allotment or garden vegetable patch or in pots or containers:

- Avoid times when the soil is waterlogged or frozen. Also avoid soils which have been recently manured. These factors can lead to rotting
- In open ground: Dig over the soil and work it to a fine tilth. If it has drainage issues add some grit to help to improve drainage
- In pots: Add pebbles to the base of the pot. Fill it with a fine compost such as *Vitax Q4 multi-purpose*
- You can work into the soil a good handful of *Blood, Fish and Bone*. This will aid your produce to establish and grow
- If grown from seed the crops should be inserted into a hole in the ground so that the top of the soil on the seedling is still at the top of the ground once planted.
- If growing from sets or cloves push them into the soil so that the tip of the set or clove is just above the surface of the soil. This will reduce the risk of birds taking them
- Seedlings, sets and cloves should be spaced in a row at a distance of 4 inches (10cm.) Shallots should be planted 8" (20cm) apart to allow room for growing
- Feed monthly with *Blood, Fish and Bone*.
- Whilst the crops should not be allowed to dry out don't overwater as this will lead to rotting
- The crops are ready to harvest once the foliage has died off completely. Dig up using a fork and allow the produce to dry in the sun and ensure that it is firm before storing in a cool dry place. Soft crops should be thrown away as they will cause other stored crops to rot

14

Perfect Plants ...

**GROW YOUR OWN
POTATOES, SHALLOTS,
ONIONS, GARLIC & RHUBARB**

Stone Cross
Garden Centre

The potato is one of the most widely eaten vegetables in Britain. According to Kantar Worldpanel Usage (52 w/e, 13/9/15) fresh potatoes form part of 5.8 billion meals made at home each year. Potato is also part of a further 2.8 billion frozen meals. However, gardeners will agree that there is nothing like produce you have grown yourself.

There are a number of types of potato suitable for boiling, mashing, roasting and baking purposes. Growing your own produce is a great way of getting children interested in the food that they eat.

Also when growing you are in control. This means that you can grow using organic chemical free methods if you wish.

Whether you have an allotment, a garden vegetable patch or just a couple of pots there is still plenty of scope to grow your own!

It is best to grow potatoes using quality "Seed Potatoes" rather than potatoes from the supermarket. This is because seed potatoes will have been screened for disease and are far more resistant to them.

Once you have purchased your seed potatoes you may wish to "chit" them. This means putting them in a dry container or egg boxes to develop sprouting shoots. However, this is not vital as there is debate as to whether this aids your crop.

Potatoes fall into three categories:

- **First Early:** Taking as little as 8 weeks from planting to harvesting. It is also possible to leave them to mature by leaving them in the ground longer. They are traditionally planted from late February onwards
- **Second Early & Salad:** Taking around 12 weeks. Although as for First Early potatoes they can be left in for longer to mature. They are traditionally planted from mid to late March onwards
- **Main Crop:** Taking 16 to 18 weeks to grow to full maturity. They are traditionally planted from early April onwards

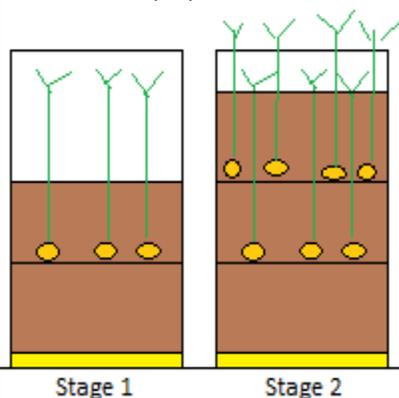
Potatoes are best grown in a frost free sunny location. To grow them in an allotment or vegetable garden it is traditional to dig a narrow trench around 4 to 6 inches (10-15cm) deep. This can be lined with compost or grass clippings and a good handful of *blood, fish and bone*. Potatoes should be spaced at:

- **First Early:** 9 inches (22cm)
- **Second Early & Salad:** 12 inches (30cm)
- **Main crop:** 15 inches (37cm)
- Rows should be at least 18 inches (45cm) apart to allow for "earthing up."
- It is advisable to add slug deterrents to either side of rows in order to protect the young shoots as they grow.
- As the shoots are 9 inches (22cm) above the ground you should "earth up" by drawing soil from the gaps between your rows to protect the shoots to a height of around 8 inches (20cm.) This is important for keeping light away from the tubers as this turns them green and potentially poisonous. You could also mulch with grass clippings to aid water retention. Remember to add additional slug deterrents as you do this.
- At fortnightly intervals you should feed your potatoes with a potash high fertiliser such as *Phostrogen*. This will help to increase your crop.

Alternatively, it is possible to grow potatoes under black polythene. This is a method often used by commercial growers. The potato tubers are planted through the polythene at a depth of 4 inches (10cm) with a hole for the shoots to grow through. The advantage

of this method is that there is no need to earth up your potatoes. However your crops are at greater risk of encountering issues with rotting.

A third method used for growing potatoes is to plant them in deep potato planters or large containers. This is particularly helpful if you have limited space or are growing "Christmas Potatoes." These are available at the Garden Centre from September onwards and are grown in a greenhouse or sheltered location where they are protected from frost and waterlogging. Put into the base of the container about an inch (3cm) of pebbles to aid drainage. Line the bottom 15cm (6in) of the container with a good draining multi-



purpose compost such as *Vitax Q4*. Place the seed potato tubers on top of this compost and add another 8 inches (20cm) of compost. This is because you will not have room to earth up. If your container is very deep you will be able to add additional levels of potatoes until the container is full. At fortnightly intervals you

should feed your potatoes with a potash high fertiliser such as *Phostrogen*. This will help to increase your crop. Keep your potatoes well-watered but do not waterlog as this will cause rotting.

After the usual growing length or once the haulms (top growth on the potatoes) have yellowed or died off you can begin lifting your potatoes. This is done by digging with a fork to get underneath the haulms. Be careful not to spear your potatoes below the surface of the soil. Once out of the ground potatoes should be left in the sun for a few hours to dry off. Then they should be stored in potato sack in a cool dry place where light is not able to get to them. Prolonged periods of light will cause potatoes to go green and become poisonous.

Potatoes can encounter five main pest and disease issues. These are detailed in the next column. It is important to rotate in your garden where you grow your potatoes. It is best to have three or more locations and move to a new one each year. This process is known as "crop rotation." If you are concerned about pests and diseases grow the main crop potato "Sarpo Mira" as this is one of the best resistant varieties available.

SLUGS & SNAILS

Often identified by their slime trails they feed on the young shoots and leaves. There are numerous ways of controlling this issue
Slug Killer Pellets: Sprinkled onto the surface of the soil
Slug Wool Pellets: This is an irritant to their skin so often they will not cross it. However, you need a lot to protect a few plants
Copper tape & sharp grit: Again these are an irritant to their skin
Companion planting: It is something of an "old wives tale" but some gardeners have found success by growing herbs such as Fennel and Rosemary in close proximity to their potatoes as the scent is said to deter slugs

POTATO BLIGHT

This disease is most common in wet, warm summers. Symptoms include a rapid spreading brown watery rot, affecting leaves, and stems. The potato tubers often have a reddish-brown decay below the skin, firm at first but soon developing into a soft rot. There is no chemical control of this disease once you have it. Removing the leaves and putting them in your council recycling bin will prevent the spread of the problem. Potatoes should be rotated away from this location for a minimum of two years. Prevention is the best form of control to stop blight. You can apply a preventative spray of Copper Mixture in June if it looks like the year will be wet.

POTATO BLACKLEG

A common bacterial disease causing black rotting at the base of the stems. Initial infections cause stunted growth and yellowing stems. If tubers form, the flesh may be grey or brown and rotten. The only control is to dispose of affected plants into your council recycling bin, rotate your potatoes yearly and to grow resistant varieties such as "Charlotte" and "Saxon."

POTATO SCAB

A disease causing raised scab-like lesions on the potato surface. It does not affect the taste of the potato, and is easily removed on peeling. There is no control for scab. It is usually worst in dry weather. Keeping potatoes well-watered and not storing potatoes with scab will help.

POTATO ROT

The rotting of potato tubers is a cause of loss before lifting. It is at its worst following a wet growing season, particularly if the tubers are then lifted from wet soil. The use of quality seed potatoes and not planting when the soil is very wet or very hard and dry will help. In addition, storing harvested potatoes in cool, dry conditions will also be beneficial in not encountering Potato Rot.

For further assistance contact

STONE CROSS GARDEN CENTRE – 01323 488188

