

Potatoes for Exhibition

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Scottish Branch



Location and Ground Preparation

I am convinced that the farther south and east you live in the UK the better chance you have of growing good quality exhibition potatoes. This is due to the drier climate. Potatoes don't like it too wet they prefer drier conditions. They were originally a sun plant.

My wife and I live in Gatehouse of Fleet in the southwest of Scotland. Due to the high rainfall, this is not an ideal spot for growing exhibition potatoes. In the south and east of the UK it is much easier to control the amount of water given. Their summer conditions are better too. This allows the grower to obtain a better skin condition which is crucial when growing exhibition potatoes.

The recognized way nowadays is to grow potatoes in polypots. I have seen these bags put on concrete, on slats, and on the ground. Personally I think the only place is on the soil. We grow ours in the same two plots every year. I dig the plots over in the Autumn and then leave them alone to winter down. We don't apply any farmyard manure now because of the problems with herbicides in the straw having residual effects. We also take a soil test. If the PH is between 5.5 and 6.0 that is good enough. Potatoes don't like much lime.



Varieties and Chitting

You can keep your own seed potatoes from year to year, buy them from a reputable seed merchant, or if you are lucky acquire them from a fellow exhibitor. We buy ours from JBA potatoes in Annan which is only 50 miles away. For white varieties we grow Winston(which is in my opinion the best white), Harmony, Nadine and NVS Sherine which are all good white varieties. For coloured varieties we grow NVS Amour, Kestrel, Blue Belle and Malin. Always buy a few more seed than you actually need. This allows you to select the best with regards to the proper shape etc for each variety. Make sure the seed is sound and has little to no scab. They are washed in a weak solution of Jeyes fluid. When they are dry they are ready for chitting. We start chitting around the end of



January or the beginning of February. Plantpak 24's are put into standard seed trays and then the seed potatoes put into single cells. They are then brought into the house and placed on top of high kitchen units. They stay there where it is nice and warm until about the middle of March. They are then transferred to a polythene greenhouse where they have a little heat. At this stage they will also be given a

couple of sprays of insecticide to discourage any bugs. About the end of March the shoots on the seed are taken down to two with the exception of Winston. Because Winston is a very strong grower three shoots are left on them. To remove the shoots you have to use a knife or something similar to remove the shoots. Do not use your nail to remove the shoots as they will simply grow again.

Preparing for Planting

We grow our potatoes in 20 litre plastic polypots. The pots are filled with riddled peat and the necessary nutrients. We have a homemade riddle which is 3' by 3'6". It stands on four 3' legs, is 8" deep and has a 1/2" mesh on the bottom. On to this we throw one 125 litre bale of Shamrock medium grade peat.



The peat is spread out over the whole riddle and the following nutrients scattered over the top of the peat. This can be quite a job as I use 64 bales each year to give me 284 bags

1 1/4lbs of Elliots Flower and Veg TEV 4

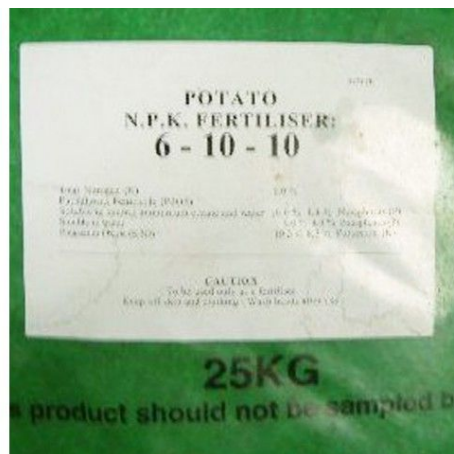
10oz of Calcified Seaweed

10oz of Seaweed Meal

200grms of Nutrimate.

This then gets mixed with the peat. Now Catherine brushes the whole lot through the riddle with a hard brush. Growing potatoes is definitely a team effort as she helps me a lot nowadays.

Before we put the mixture into the 20 litre bags, we put extra holes in them. I use a 1/2 inch round pipe sharpened at one end. I think this helps the roots to go into the soil later on. We fill the bags right up to the top ready to lay out in their growing position. The bags are layed out in double rows of 26. We put them in domino fashion to allow the haulms to get the maximum light and sun available. We then dig a trench 3" deep and 2ft wide for a double row and dig in about 6oz to the square yard of Elliots potato fertiliser(6.10.10) and a few slug pellets.



This is done right down both plots until all the bags are laid out. I make a hole about two thirds down the bag and insert a potato into each hole, one potato to each bag. If you live in a dry area it will be necessary to water, but here in Gatehouse of Fleet, this is rarely needed. It rains frequently! It is a good idea to fill a few 8" pots with the peat mixture for each double row and plant one potato in each. Put them at each end of the double row as you can guarantee that 1 or 2 potatoes in each row won't be up to the standard that you want. You can easily take out the bad ones and replace them with ones from the pots. Now when all the potatoes are planted, earth up the sides of the bags and lightly dig between them.

Growing On

Once all the potatoes are planted, which in Scotland is about the end of April, we leave them until we see the shoots breaking through. Then we put in 6x4" posts to each double row. 2 at each end and 2 in the middle.



The reason for this is twofold. We can still get frosts here until the first week in June so we can throw black polythene over the posts to protect the potatoes from the frost. Never put the polythene right down on top of the bags. From my experience, I have found that an extra severe frost can go right through the polythene and burn the tips of the young haulms. Putting on polythene each time frost is forecast is a pain, but it is worth it to save your potatoes. The second use for the posts is to hold a horizontal pea and bean net over each double row. I put it about 2 foot above the bags to keep the haulms upright. I also put a length of Evaflow irrigation along the top of each net so I can water the potatoes if needed.

The critical time to ensure they have enough water is when the haulms are between nine inches and a foot high. This is when the young potatoes are forming and when they are prone to scab if they are allowed to dry out. When the haulms are about nine inches high give them a feed of Calcium Nitrate and another about two weeks later. From then on feed every week with Maxicrop mixed with Chempak No4 until it is time to cut the haulms.



The most critical thing about growing exhibition potatoes is having the haulms growing the right number of weeks for each variety. This will provide a good skin finish. I have worked out over the years that all the varieties we grow need 13 weeks except Winston which needs 11 and NVS Amour which needs 14 weeks. If the haulms are left on the plants too long the potatoes will get what I call "netting" and the skins can become rough. If this happens you will struggle to get them fit for the show bench.



Diseases

In my experience potatoes are not prone to many diseases growing them for show the way we do. The two that you are most likely to suffer are Blight and Common Scab. Blight is a serious disease that will devastate your crop very quickly. Blight is caused by a fungus which spreads via airborne spores on the wind until it lands on a susceptible plant and the weather conditions are right for it to develop. The warm and humid conditions ideal for blight to develop have been formally defined and are known as Smith Periods. A 'Smith period' is a 48 hour period in which the minimum temperature is 10°C or more and the relative humidity exceeds 90% for at least 11 hours during the first 24 hours and for at least



11 hours again during the final 24 hours.

By watching for Smith periods it is possible to predict when blight is most likely to appear and use that warning for growers to take preventative action. The only way to keep it at bay is to spray preventatively every two weeks

from the beginning of June. However it is not easy to get protective sprays nowadays so try and find one that is readily available to the amateur grower. With regards to Common Scab ,with good husbandry you should not see this. Young potatoes are more prone to this disease when they are about the size of a golf ball so never allow them to dry out as this will allow the scab to affect your crop. Make sure your potatoes are at least moist all the time



Harvesting

Once the haulms have been on for the right number of weeks take away the nets and the posts and cut the haulms right down to the top of the bags. I then cover all the bags with black polythene to allow them to dry out and leave them for about 14 days. After this the bags are taken into the shed one variety at a time. The bags are emptied one at a time onto the riddle which now has a top on it and has become a table. The potatoes are carefully taken out of the bags in order they are not marked or damaged. The ones that look like they will be fit to exhibit are placed on another table and are then weighed. We use potatoes that are from 170 grams to 220 grams. They are then sorted into the sets that you require and boxed up in salmon boxes filled with peat. Some exhibitors use fresh peat whilst others use the peat from the bags. I have used both to good effect. When sorting them into sets I make sure that there are at least 2 spares in the set and then mark on the outside of the box the variety and which show they are destined for.



Preparing for the Show and Exhibiting

A good plate of potatoes should have the following. Firstly you must have excellent skin condition. Very few judges will look at potatoes in poor condition. Secondly they need to be a good size and shape for the variety and thirdly the potatoes need to be uniform. If it is a collection of potatoes with multi plates you are showing all plates should be uniform. To prepare the potatoes for exhibiting I have used the following method for some years with a fair bit of success. First of all bring all the sets into the house that you have marked for the show. All the potatoes in the set including the spares are then washed gently under cold running water with a soft sponge. Nothing else apart from water is required. Make sure all the scum is off the potato and they are down to a clean skin. Remember condition is all important. I have seen too many potatoes at a show that are not properly cleaned and the exhibitor has never stood a chance as no judge will look at them. Next lay out what you think are the best for the number that you require for the schedule. I set them on a plate to have a look. They are then given a final cold water rinse and set on the bare kitchen worktop to dry. Incidentally this can be done as much as 3 days before a show - no need to be washing potatoes in your hotel room at 2 am ! Under no circumstances should you try and dry the potatoes - leave them to dry naturally. Turn them over on to a dry bit of worktop every 10 minutes until they appear to be dry. I find using this method that this gives the potatoes a shine. As I said they appear to be dry but they actually are not. If you wrap them up at this point you are liable to get black spots on them. Cover them all with a black cloth and leave them until the next morning. In the morning have a final look before wrapping them in kitchen paper and then newspaper. We then transport them in buckets. Once at the show lay them out on the plates with the rose end facing out. Don't forget your staging card and then clear off until the show opens! When , with any luck, you come back there will be a red card. There is no better feeling so good luck!



2012 World Potato Championship Winner



2014 Scottish Championships Coloured and White Winner



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