



TOP LEFT Jacky climbs the steep banks with her harvest of Jersey Royals. RIGHT Chitted potatoes ready for planting. BELOW LEFT Before cooking, simply knock off the soil with your hand under running water, keeping as much of the skin as possible. OPPOSITE PAGE For a taste similar to the Jersey Royals, grow a crop of first earlies.



Potatoes

On the Channel Island of Jersey, there's a premium potato harvest offering tasty spuds that will suit all gardens, cooking habits and tastes

PHOTOGRAPHS MICHELLE GARRETT WORDS JACKY HOBBS

The British potato season starts with Jersey Royals, the first and very much prized crops that are on our plates even before we have planted a single tuber of our own. Jersey Royals have Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status, in the same way as Champagne or Parma ham, and this denotes their geographical uniqueness in situation, cultivation and variety. Jersey's well-drained, south-facing slopes warm up quickly, and enjoy the intensified rays of refracted sunlight. Its steeper coastal slopes, or cotils, produce the very first, small and most delicate of this veritable gold. The potatoes are tenderly hand picked, despite the incline; quickly bagged to protect their delicate skins from sunlight; and whisked away for immediate consumption. Like all early potatoes, Jersey Royals do not keep. They are best bought with soil still on them, and eaten on the day of digging.

For those of us living on the mainland, potatoes are also relatively easy to grow. They are a particularly excellent first crop for previously neglected spaces in the garden and valuable when used in rotation, following on from onions and root vegetables, and preceding winter-cropping brassicas. When considering which potatoes to plant, be adventurous and don't be afraid to experiment with taste and even colour. Always select certified seed potatoes, resisting the temptation to plant sprouting tubers grown for culinary use, as these may result in the importation of all manner of pests and diseases. ▶



Expert advice

CHARLIE MOURANT, TECHNICAL MANAGER AT ALBERT BARTLETT & SONS (JERSEY) LTD SAYS:

- **Choose healthy, firm seed potatoes.** ‘Chit, keeping the seed covered until a pale shoot develops. Knock this off. Stand each potato, rose-end up, in a box/egg carton with good light, and keep in a frost-free place.
- **When shoots develop and grow** to 5cm tall, or are beginning to sprout green shoots, plant out in rich/fertilised soil. Jersey farmers use the island’s seaweed, or a seaweed extract, but a balanced NKP fertiliser along with well-rotted manure will do the job. Dobies do an organic-based potato fertiliser, 5kg for £8.95.
- **Place seed potato in a 10cm-deep trench,** at an angle on the sloping trench wall, shoots facing upright. Cover with earth, taking care not to damage new shoots. Protect from frost with fleece as required.
- **After eight weeks,** bank up earth over emerging foliage to prevent new tubers unearthing and going green.
- **Water in dry weather,** but never in full sun, and aim to have foliage dry before nightfall to help avoid risk of blight.
- **Early potatoes can be ready to lift** around 10 to 12 weeks after planting. Lift them after they have flowered and before foliage dies back. Wash off the mud and enjoy as soon as you can.



ABOVE Jacky experiences the early crops of Jersey Royals RIGHT Jersey Royals taste different as the season progresses. FAR RIGHT The spuds are shipped to Britain as quickly as possible so we can all enjoy the premium taste. BELOW LEFT Charlie Mourant of Barlett & Sons has plenty of growing advice.

When planning crops, think about the quantities likely to be eaten and how you like to cook them. First earlies are the first to be harvested and are the delicious new potatoes that, ideally, should be eaten on the day of lifting, simply boiled in their skins. Varieties include ‘Arran Pilot’, ‘Accord’ and ‘Lady Christl’. Plant out chitted potatoes in March and April, at a depth of 10cm and around 30cm apart, leaving 60cm between rows. Jersey farmers plant rows closer, leaving a distance of around 45cm to give greater wind protection. Lift potatoes daily once flowers appear.

Second earlies include ‘Nadine’, ‘Kestrel’ and the fabulously coloured and tasty heritage variety ‘Edzell Blue’. True to its name, it has a blue skin and floury white flesh, making it particularly good for mash. Plant this variety later in April, spacing them around 5 to 10cm apart to encourage larger tubers. The crop will take 15-20 weeks to mature, depending on the weather.

Main crop potatoes are meant for storing and take a little longer to ‘set’ their skins. They generally make good chips and bakers. ‘Rooster’ and later ‘Valor’ are good all rounders. Main crop potatoes should be planted after the risk of frost has gone, spacing them 40 to 45cm apart and 70cm to 75cm between rows. Potatoes should be ready for eating in 15 to 20 weeks, at which time stems can be cut back. Spuds should be left underground for a further two weeks for the skins to set.

This year sees the launch of new potato varieties from Suttons (www.suttons.co.uk) that will further extend the planting season to late May. So there’s really no excuse not to get some in.



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For perfect crops

SLUGS can attack foliage and tubers. Suttons offer several varieties that are more resistant to slugs, such as ‘Pentland Javelin’, ‘Desiree’, ‘Maris Peer’ and ‘Swift’. There’s a wide range of slug control available, suitable for edible crops.

BLIGHT is a fungal disease, heralded by blackened leaves, which can wipe out your potato crop. It is particularly prevalent during periods of warm and humid weather, during which there has been a lot of rain. Increase your chances of resisting it by ensuring good ventilation and choosing disease-resistant seed. Plants can be protected

with products such as Diathane 945. Do not place infested potato haulms on the compost heap.

CLEAN up well after harvesting and remove all old tubers and any crop debris that could harbour pests and diseases.

ROTATE crops seasonally, and do not plant with other members of the nightshade family such as tomato, aubergine, pepper or chilli. Ensure the removal of any deadly nightshade, *Atropa belladonna*, growing nearby.

BIRDS Protect crops with netting, Agroguard or Enviromesh, net curtains or chicken wire (this will also inhibit egg-laying butterflies, but prohibit handy aphid eaters). Hanging old compact disks scares birds too.



Recipe: Roast langoustine tails with Jersey Royals

Mark Jordan, the Michelin-starred chef at the Atlantic Hotel on Jersey, is in the right place to get the pick of the crop, and make this tasty dish. ‘Larger, more mature Jersey Royals have greater depth of flavour. I prefer getting them with the soil on, so I can delicately wash in cold water, without rubbing away the fragile skin. If you have to store them temporarily, do so in a cool dark place, but not the fridge.’

- Ingredients - serves four:**
- 2-3 slices of Parma ham
 - 12 fresh langoustine tails, shells removed
 - 12 medium-sized Jersey Royals
 - 150g (6oz) fresh peas
 - 50g (2oz) butter
 - Juice of half a lemon
 - Sprouted peas
- **Place the slices of Parma ham** between two sheets of greaseproof paper, and put in oven at 130°C for 15-20 mins. Remove, then peel back the paper. The ham will be crisp when cool, and can be broken into 12 large pieces.
 - **Boil the Jersey Royals** in salted water for five to 15 mins, according to their size.
 - **Blanch peas** in boiling water for 10 seconds, remove and liquidise.
 - **In a sauté pan,** add a small drizzle of oil and gently heat. Slice the Jersey Royals while they’re still warm and sauté until golden brown. Remove from pan and keep warm.
 - **In the same pan,** add the langoustine tails and cook on each side for one minute. Return the Jersey Royals to the pan with a knob of butter and the lemon juice, and then season.
 - **On each plate,** place a drag of pea purée, followed by three disks each of Jersey Royals. Place a langoustine tail on each.
 - **Garnish with freshly cut** sprouted peas and the pieces of Parma ham, and serve immediately.