IFAS Extension
Baker County Extension Service

1025 West Macclenny Ave.
Macclenny, FL 32063
(904) 259-3520
(904) 259-9034 Fax
http://baker.ifas.ufl.edu

It's Potato Planting Time

Written by Alicia Lamborn, Horticulture Extension Agent, and Mary Ann Ray, Baker County Master Gardener, UF/IFAS Extension Baker County

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It's easy to grow potatoes, which are planted in the coolest months of January to March here in North Florida. Look for seed potatoes at your local feed store or garden center, which are likely to be good varieties for Florida gardens and have not been treated to prevent sprouting like those in the grocery store.

The most popular and successful varieties grown in Florida are based on yield, disease resistance, quality and adaptability to warm climates. These include white-skinned potatoes 'Yukon Gold', 'Gold Rush', 'LaChipper', and 'Sebago', and red-skinned varieties 'Red Pontiac', 'Red LaSoda', and 'LaRouge'. Florida does not have a standard russet variety for commercial production, but home gardeners can select varieties that mature relatively early (100-115 days) such as the variety 'Russet Norkotah'. Exotic potato varieties are also fun and exciting to try, since these unusual varieties cannot be purchased in the supermarket. They are often smaller, taking less time to cook, but are

also very colorful which can increase nutritional content. For example, potatoes with a bright orange flesh have more carotenoids and those with red pigments have more anthocyanins, both of which have health benefits. Other fun varieties include fingerling types and blue/purple flesh varieties such as the 'All Blue' potato which has deep blue skin and flesh and even produces blue flowers.

Before planting, you'll need to cut the seed potato so that each piece is about the size of an egg, with at least one eye per section, and let them dry in a cool, dark place for a couple days. Plant the sections in a 4-6 inch deep trench that receives full sun, with the cut side down and eyes (sprouts) facing up.

Unless your soil test results say otherwise, no lime should be applied before planting and a 10-0-10 fertilizer should be applied at 7.5 pounds per 100 foot row, both at planting and again 3-4 weeks later by side-dressing fertilizer about 4-6 inches to either side of the plant.

Since new potato tubers could push up above the soil surface, you need to mound soil around the stems as the plant grows. In about three months you'll enjoy potatoes. Remove the tops 2-3 weeks before digging to "toughen the skin." After harvesting, keep potatoes in a cool (60-65°F), dark place for 10-14 days to allow cuts and bruises to heal. Then move them to a final storage location with a high relative humidity, good aeration, and cool temperatures (38-40°F). Washed tubers should be allowed to dry thoroughly before storing. Under proper conditions, potatoes can store for 3–6 months or more.

For more information, see *Growing Potatoes in the Florida Home Garden* at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hs183

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