

Potatoes: Nearly A Half-Bushel Per Foot

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Welcome through Fred's Garden Gate! Well, it's too late for this season—at least in Central Maine—but there's still time to prepare and plan a very different way to grow potatoes *next* season.

Early this Spring (2000), I ordered my Dark Red Norland potatoes from Johnny's and decided I'd had enough of rows and rows of spuds taking up most of the prime space in our veggie patch. So...I borrowed a concept from a distant friend, highly refined it, and now grow them *vertically!* The up-side: where 5 pounds of spud "seed" formerly planted about 40 feet of row, now the same plants occupy a circular space 2-1/2 feet across by 36" tall. And considering the harvest rate, that cooks down to just short of a bushel and a half for the space used! The only down-side that I can see: the planting tends to dry out quicker than if planted directly in the ground. Here's the deal:



Find yourself about ten feet of 36" wide "hog wire" that has wire spacing of 1" by 2", then roll it into a vertical "cylinder" (now 3-feet tall) and lace it together with either wire or synthetic cord.

Once laced securely, it's time to cut the openings through which your potato "seed" will be inserted. Each hole will be approximately 3" by 4" - just large enough to push the "seed" through, and for the plant to grow through. I arranged mine so there were four openings tall on the cylinder, and 10 openings on each of the four tiers.

Stand this now completed cylinder on one end in the full sun, and drive a stout stake *outside* on each side (at "9 O'clock" and "3 O'clock") to keep it standing

on end.

The next step involves a wheelbarrow and some elbow-grease: fill this wire enclosure right to the top with the freshest compost or very high organic matter soil— not the usual stuff ("dirt") you usually grow your potatoes in!—you can get your hands on, and slightly shake the cage a little to settle it down. I used 100% compost—a biologically hot-rot product using my own 21-day, no-turn composting method (see the article in archives: [Fast Composting!](#) (use your Back-Button to return directly to this page). Moisten thoroughly and then let it sit for a couple of hours to drain out.



Note: Another system similar to this uses, instead of wire, a relatively rigid recycled plastic sheet with convenient holes drilled for the plants, which you're supposed to roll into a cylinder, fasten, and plant as you fill. In my experience, planting in layers from the bottom up inside the enclosure is fraught with an annoying handicap: by the time planting has reached the top, the bottom layers have compressed, forcing the already planted potato seed down and away from the hole. As it sprouts, more often than not it misses the hole and spends the entire season trying to get to the top rather than expending all that wasted energy producing a good crop.

When you fill and settle first—especially when using wire—the seed is pushed through the openings, where they stay put...and can "see" daylight so they know which way is "out"!

OK!...all filled up, settled down and ready to plant! But first, you should have cut your potato "seed" into smaller pieces about 24-hours ago so the cut surfaces have a chance to "heal". Most seed potatoes can be cut into thirds or fourths (+/-)...just be dead certain each piece has at least one "eye" or growing point. After cutting, spread them out on a clean surface (an elevated screen will allow good air circulation) in an airy, dry place out of the sun.

Actual planting is pure simplicity. Gently press each piece through each hole in your compost filled and moistened wire cylinder so that *just the slightest bit* remains visible.

You should end up with several pieces left over....nudge them into the top surface about 6" apart and a couple inches deep. If you *still* have a couple pieces left, keep them in a cool, dark place because one or two of the ones planted may turn out to be "duds", and you'll have replacements (I didn't keep any in reserve and, consequently, there are a couple of gaps in my y2k vertical potato "field". Oh, well....there's always *next year!*). Here's what it should look like about 3 weeks after planting (some seed-pieces may be a bit slower than others, so have patience:



Now comes the boring part: Maintain moisture throughout the remainder of the season - remember that it'll dry out faster than if planted directly in ground-level soil - and, after about 5 or 6 weeks, you may enjoy "stealing" a few little, 1-inch "baby" spuds from the top layer...to put into soups or stews, or just wash off and crunch down on the spot.

At the end of the season, after the tops have wearied, turned yellow-green and have obviously done their duty, remove all the external plant parts, push it over, give it a good shake to liberate the wire cage (or untie the lacings and remove wire that way)...and harvest your potato crop *without the necessity of digging up 40 or 50 feet of row!* The photo at the right shows a few of the 45

pounds of spuds retrieved at harvest...nice size and almost totally devoid of distortions and scab. We'll be doing this again!

All that's left to do is retrieve the wire, clean it off a bit and store it for next years' crop. Spread the compost around the rest of the garden and till it in to improve your soil. Oh, I almost forgot: *don't* use any kind of manure as part of the mix....chances are you'll end up with scabby spuds. And you might also consider moving the planting around to a different - possibly distant - spot each year to make it more difficult for the Colorado Potato Beetles to find your crop (they spend the winter in the ground very near where they were originally hatched....but if there aren't any potatoes there the next season, that should help keep their numbers down).



An alternative method:

Some years back, customers of ours recommended this also-very-effective (but not quite as space-saving) method of growing spuds: they made foot-tall raised beds out of old planks, filled them with high-organic-matter (probably compost), laid out their seed potatoes and covered them with straw—lots of it, apparently. Their potato plants grew up through the straw, looked magnificent, entertained no beetles, and harvesting involved little more than removing the straw and picking up spuds.