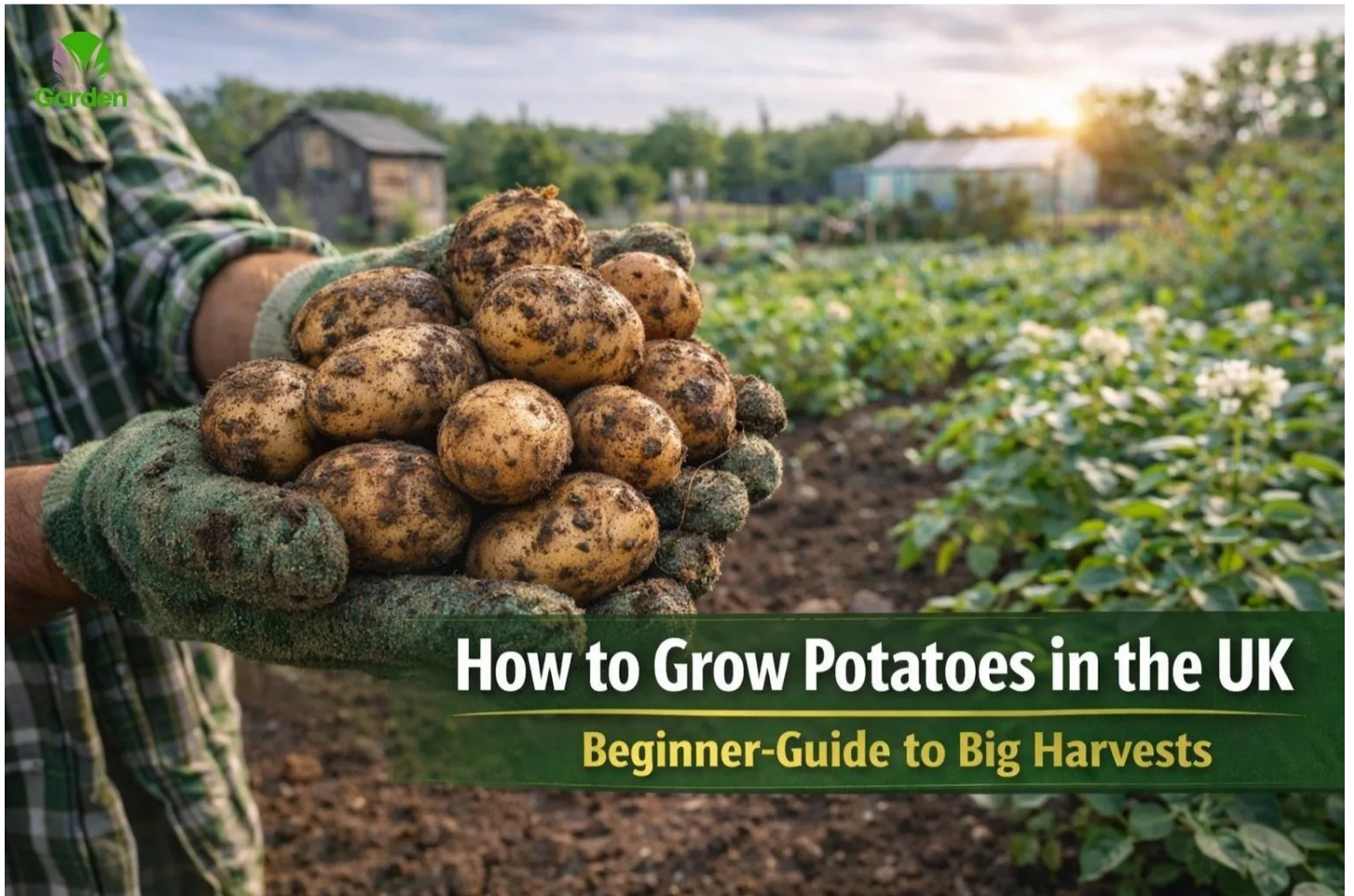




How to Grow Potatoes

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How to Grow Potatoes in the UK

Beginner-Guide to Big Harvests

How to Grow Potatoes in the UK

How to grow potatoes in the UK comes down to five simple stages: buy seed potatoes, chit them, plant into warm soil from March to May, earth up the shoots as they grow, and harvest from June onwards. That is genuinely the whole job. Potatoes are the crop I point every nervous beginner towards, because they are forgiving, they crop heavily, and there is nothing quite like tipping out that first bucket of earlies. Get the soil and the timing roughly right and the plant does the rest, which is more than can be said for most things in a vegetable garden.

Potatoes were the first thing I ever grew that made me feel like a proper gardener, back when I barely knew what I was doing on a heavy patch of Oxfordshire clay. Twenty-odd years on, they are still the crop I would tell anyone to start with. This guide walks through the whole thing, from choosing seed to storing the harvest, and points you to the more detailed pages in the potato cluster wherever you need to dig deeper.

Why Potatoes Are Such a Good Crop to Learn With

Potatoes suit the UK better than almost any other vegetable.

They like our cool, damp climate, they are not fussy about warmth the way tomatoes are, and they crop reliably even in a poor summer. A few seed potatoes can turn into a genuinely useful amount of food, and the plants do most of the work themselves once they are in.

They are also brilliant for breaking in rough ground. The digging you do to plant and harvest them, plus the earthing up in between, loosens and works the soil, which is why old gardeners talk about potatoes as a cleaning crop for a new plot. If you are staring at a patch of tired lawn or weedy ground wondering where to start, a row of spuds is a fine answer, and the general principles carry over to everything else in how to get started growing veg.

The Three Types of Potato, and Why It Matters

The single most useful thing to understand at the start is that potatoes come in three groups, and the group decides when you plant and when you harvest. First earlies (look for first early seed potatoes like Rocket or Swift) are your new potatoes, planted from mid to late March and lifted small and waxy in June and July. Because they come out early, they usually dodge the blight that arrives later in summer, which makes them the safest choice for a beginner.

Second earlies follow on, planted early to mid April for a mid-summer crop, a good middle option that gives slightly larger potatoes, with second early varieties such as Charlotte among the most reliable. Maincrop are the big storing potatoes, planted mid April into early May and left in the ground the longest, giving the heavy autumn crop that fills the store for winter, and maincrop varieties reward the wait. Maincrop need the most space and patience but reward you with the most food. If you want the full timing breakdown, including regional differences, it lives in when to plant potatoes in the UK.

Chitting: Worth the Trouble for Earlies

Chitting just means letting seed potatoes sprout before you plant them. Stand them in an old egg box on a cool, bright windowsill a few weeks ahead, eyes pointing up, and let them grow short, stubby, dark green shoots. It gives them a head start, and for first earlies, where every week earlier means an earlier crop, it is genuinely worth doing.

For maincrop it matters far less and plenty of good growers skip it. The one mistake to avoid is chitting somewhere warm and dark, which gives you long, pale, brittle shoots that snap off at planting. Cool and light is the whole trick. And do buy proper seed potatoes rather than sprouting supermarket ones, which are often treated to stop them growing and can carry disease.

Soil and Where to Plant



Planting chitted seed potatoes, shoots pointing up, about 12cm deep. A trench or individual holes both work fine.

Potatoes want an open, sunny spot and soil that drains rather than sits wet. They are not too fussy beyond that, but they do best in ground that has been improved with plenty of well-rotted organic matter, which feeds them and holds moisture without waterlogging. Dig some compost in the autumn or winter before planting and you will see the difference in the crop. My guide to improving garden soil covers how, and if your ground stays wet, sort the drainage first or grow in containers instead.

Two things to avoid. Do not plant into freshly manured ground, which can encourage scab and lush growth over good tubers. And do not fight heavy compacted soil, which potatoes hate; on bad ground, raised beds or big containers give a far better crop than a struggle with the clay. If your soil is the sticky kind that clings to your boots, soil compaction in UK gardens is worth a read.

Planting: Depth, Spacing and Timing

Plant tubers about 12cm deep with the shoots pointing up.

Spacing depends on type: earlies want roughly 30cm between tubers with 45 to 60cm between rows, while maincrop need more room, around 40cm apart with 75cm between rows, because they build bigger plants. Crowding maincrop is a false economy, since the plants shade each other and the tubers stay small.

The depth matters because potatoes form on the stem above the seed tuber, not below it, which is the whole reason earthing up works later. Too shallow and the developing potatoes push up into the light and turn green, which is mildly toxic and best not eaten. As for timing, the soil overrules the calendar: it wants to be around 7 to 10C and no longer cold and sticky before you plant, which on my clay is always a couple of weeks later than the seed packet suggests.

Growing Potatoes in Containers

If you have no bed, or soil you would rather not fight, potatoes grow brilliantly in bags and large containers, and first earlies are the best type for it. A big tub or a purpose-made potato bag, a couple of seed potatoes, and you are away. The compost warms faster than open ground too, so you can often plant a little earlier.

Start with about 15cm of compost, sit the tubers on it, cover, and keep adding compost to bury the lower stems as the shoots grow, exactly like earthing up, until the container is full. The one thing containers punish is drought, because they dry out fast and a thirsty potato gives a poor, knobbly crop, so keep them well watered once growing strongly. There is more on the principles in growing vegetables in pots.

Protecting the Shoots from Frost



The vulnerable stage. Once shoots break the surface, a single frost can blacken them overnight.

The tubers underground are safe enough, but the moment the shoots break the surface they are at the mercy of a cold night. A sharp frost blackens the new growth, and while the plant usually recovers by pushing out fresh shoots, it loses time and yield doing it. This is the main reason not to rush planting in a mild March.

Two things protect them: earthing up, which buries and insulates emerging shoots, and a layer of garden fleece thrown over the row when frost is forecast. Both are cheap insurance. I have gone through the options in detail in protecting potato shoots from frost, and it is worth checking your own likely frost dates with the last frost date checker before you plant.

Earthing Up as They Grow



A healthy row well earthed up. The ridges protect the tubers, stop greening, and give the plant more stem to crop along.

Once the plants reach 15 to 20cm tall, draw soil up around the stems to form a ridge, leaving just the top few centimetres of leaf showing. Repeat it every couple of weeks as they grow. It sounds like a chore and it is the job that does the most for your crop, protecting shoots from late frost, stopping the tubers greening in the light, and giving the plant more buried stem to set potatoes along.

A draw hoe makes short work of it. On a small bed you can do it by hand, but your back will notice by the third row.

Watering and Feeding

Potatoes are thirsty plants, and the moment that matters most is when the tubers are forming, roughly when the plants come into flower. A good soak during that period makes a real difference to the size and number of potatoes you lift, whereas letting them dry out then gives a smaller, knobblier crop. Container potatoes especially need watching, because they dry out fast in summer.

Feeding is straightforward. If the ground was well prepared with organic matter, earlies often need nothing at all. Maincrop, in the ground longer, benefit from a balanced feed as they get going, but do not overdo the nitrogen, which pushes leafy top growth at the expense of tubers. The wider care through the season is covered in how to care for potato plants.

Diseases and Problems to Watch

Blight is the big one, the same disease that hits tomatoes, arriving on warm, wet weather in mid to late summer. It turns leaves brown and mushy and can rot the tubers, and the best defences are growing first earlies that crop before it strikes and choosing resistant varieties like Sarpo for maincrop. There is a full guide in potato blight.

Scab shows as rough patches on the skin, usually cosmetic and worse on dry, limy soil, and adding organic matter helps. Slugs are the other nuisance, tunnelling into tubers left in the ground too long, which is another reason to lift maincrop promptly. If your plants are struggling in other ways, potato plants not growing and common potato problems work through the causes.

Harvesting and Storing



The best part. Earlies are ready when the flowers open, so have a gentle dig and see what you have.

Earlies are ready when the flowers open, usually about 10 to 12 weeks after planting, and the best test is to dig up one plant and see. Eat them fresh, since new potatoes do not store. Maincrop are left until the foliage yellows and dies back, then given another couple of weeks in the ground so the skins set firm before you lift them for storage.

For storing, let lifted maincrop dry off for a few hours, then keep only undamaged tubers in paper or hessian sacks somewhere cool, dark and frost-free like a shed or garage. Never store them in the light, which turns them green, or in plastic, which makes them sweat and rot. Stored well, a good maincrop crop will keep you in potatoes through much of the winter, which is the whole point of growing them.

Where Potatoes Fit in the Garden

Potatoes belong in a crop rotation, ideally following a different family and not grown on the same ground two years running, which helps keep blight and other soil problems from building up (the RHS has a good primer on rotation). They pair naturally with the rest of the main-season vegetables, and because they break in and clean the soil, they make a good first crop on new ground before you move on to fussier things.

If you are planning the wider plot around them, the vegetable planting calendar puts potatoes alongside everything else going in through spring, so you can see how the season fits together.

How to Grow Potatoes in the UK: Frequently Asked Questions

How do you grow potatoes in the UK for beginners?

Buy seed potatoes, chit the earlies on a windowsill, plant into warm soil from March to May, earth up the shoots as they grow, keep them watered, and harvest from June onwards. First earlies are the easiest to start with.

Are potatoes easy to grow in the UK?

Yes, they are one of the most forgiving crops for UK gardens. They suit our cool, damp climate, crop well even in a poor summer, and largely look after themselves once planted.

Do you need to chit seed potatoes?

Chitting helps first earlies get away faster and is worth doing. For maincrop it makes little difference. Chit somewhere cool and light, never warm and dark, which gives weak, brittle shoots.

How deep and how far apart do you plant potatoes?

Plant about 12cm deep with shoots pointing up. Earlies want around 30cm between tubers, maincrop around 40cm, with wider rows for maincrop as they build bigger plants.

Why do you earth up potatoes?

Earthing up protects emerging shoots from frost, stops the tubers greening in the light, and gives the plant more buried stem to form potatoes along, which increases the crop.

Can you grow potatoes in pots or bags?

Yes, and first earlies do especially well. Use a big container, start with compost over the tubers and keep adding more as they grow, and water regularly because containers dry out fast.

When are potatoes ready to harvest?

First earlies are ready when the flowers open, about 10 to 12 weeks after planting. Maincrop are left until the foliage dies back, then given a couple of weeks more before lifting for storage.

How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

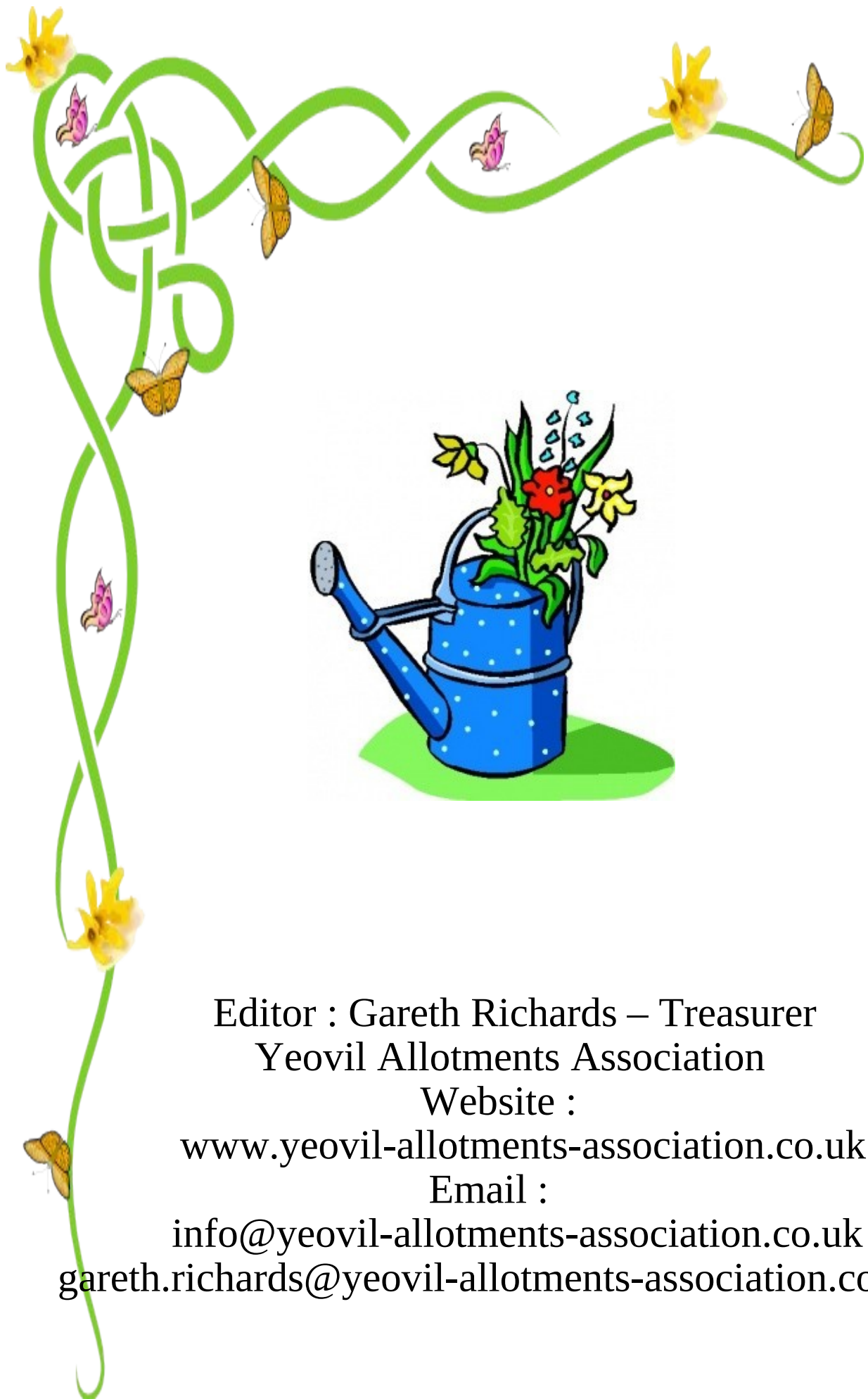
We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenting and best wishes,

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