

Would You Like Fries With That?

Potatoes are a key component in most cultures' diets and are the world's fourth largest food crop, following rice, wheat and corn (maize). The average American eats 134 pounds of potatoes a year and is the second most consumed food, trailing only milk products. Contrary to popular belief, potatoes are not high in calories. One medium sized potato contains 150 calories, while a one cup serving of rice has 225 calories and a cup of pasta has 200 calories.

The potato (*Solanum tuberosum*), is a starchy, tuberous crop, belonging to the Solanaceae family, commonly known as nightshades. In 1621, the first potatoes arrived in North America in two large trunks from The Governor of Bermuda, Captain Nathaniel Butler, who sent them to the Governor of Virginia at Jamestown, Francis Wyatt. It took seven different deliveries of potatoes before they gained acceptance in America, with help from Benjamin Franklin.

While Franklin was serving as the ambassador to France, he attended a banquet where the potato was served 20 different ways and returned to America proclaiming that the potato was the superior vegetable. Americans followed the trendsetting Franklin and potatoes began to be grown in colonies and across the Western frontier. The first known planting of potatoes in Oregon took place in 1795 on an island in the Columbia River, followed with plantings at Fort Astoria and Fort Vancouver. With the increase of pioneer settlement, potato cultivation increased and became a main staple in the western diet.

Potatoes produced in Central Oregon are cultivated for seed potatoes, also known as tubers. Potato seed is grown primarily in Jefferson County, near Madras and Culver. Potatoes are generally planted from late March to mid June, depending upon the weather, elevation and soil moisture. The "seed potatoes" are cut into uniform pieces using a machine and are usually treated with a seed treatment that helps prevent infection and rot caused by bacteria and fungi. The cut pieces are then planted into the fields using a special planter pulled behind a tractor.

Once the plants emerge, farmers have to monitor watering carefully because drought stressed plants produce smaller, lower quality seed potatoes. Farmers also monitor fertilizer applications and stop fertilizing towards the middle of the growing season to encourage the plant to place its growth on the tubers below ground instead of the plant above ground.

Potato seed crops are harvested starting in July and can go through October, depending upon the location and variety of potato. The field is "killed" prior to harvesting by stopping irrigation or spraying the leaves and stems with a chemical that dries down the crop. The potatoes are then left in the ground for about ten days, allowing the skin to dry and harden, which helps prevent infection when they are being stored. The potatoes are then dug up mechanically and placed in windrows where they are then picked up using a special machine that shakes and separates the potatoes from dirt and vines. Seed potatoes are then transferred by truck loads to climate controlled storage facilities where they are kept until they are needed for planting.

In Jefferson County 400 acres of potato seed were planted and cultivated in 2012, yielding 32,000 pounds of potatoes an acre and grossing \$1,664,000. For more information about potatoes and to see where some fields are in the area, visit the Jefferson County Seed Growers website at www.jeffcoseed.com.