

Eat Main Crop Potatoes!

Nutritious, delicious and endlessly versatile, the potato is by far the most important vegetable in Europe and has been particularly warmly embraced by cooks in the UK and Ireland. How impoverished would our national cuisine be without golden roast potatoes, thick-cut chips, or creamy mash?

After selecting the right potato for the job, a little attention to detail during preparation can transform the humble spud into a gastronomic experience that is hard to beat. Just try reading the small selection of recipes we've picked out without wanting to make one immediately.

HISTORY - Potatoes were cultivated five thousand years ago in what is now Peru. They were introduced to Europe via Spain in the 1550s and arrived in the UK sometime in the 1590s. Somewhat surprisingly, potatoes weren't grown in North America until they were taken by Irish emigrants in 1719. They travelled to Australasia with Captain Cook in 1770.

When first introduced to Britain, potatoes were an exotic and expensive food with a reputation as an aphrodisiac. It was more than a century later before they became a firmly established staple food.

In the 1840s the potato crop in much of Europe was wiped out by potato blight - an infection of the fungus *Phytophthora infestans*. Ireland was particularly badly hit as the crop was dominated by a single, highly susceptible, variety. In just over a decade the population of Ireland dropped by over a fifth: it is estimated that a million people died of malnutrition and a million more emigrated. This tragic episode serves as a reminder of the importance of maintaining genetic diversity in agriculture.

BOLOGY - *Solanum tuberosum* is a plant in the nightshade family that is now grown in some 130 countries in all corners of the world. Potato plants reproduce vegetatively by growing tubers from which the new plant develops, hence potatoes are clones (the offspring are genetically identical to the parent plant).

BUYING - Pick potatoes that are firm, with smooth undamaged skin. Avoid any that are bruised, tinged with green or sprouting.

Flavour and sweetness are increased by frost, so parsnips are better during mid/late winter.

COOKING - Scan the code below to view the recipe for '*Chips with spiced salt & smoked garlic mayo*' on the seasonal recipes blog.



or visit: qmulsustainability.wordpress.com/recipes