

Even though Easter is something of a movable feast, it is for most allotment and kitchen gardeners the time to begin potato sowing. I like to rotate my allotment beds through a four year cycle in order to avoid a build up of pests in any one area that would prey on a particular vegetable. In the case of the potato, the soil born pest we want to avoid most is the eelworm.

That's the common name for the potato cyst nematode that attaches itself to the roots of the tubers and literally sucks the life out of the plants.

These potatoes have not been forced. I have kept them frost free and in good light. The early potatoes like the 'Casablanca' will break dormancy first and the main croppers like the 'Lady Balfour' and early main cropper 'Picasso' will take a little longer to sprout. Some of these varieties are grown purely for the house on account of taste and suitability for various tasks. The 'Marfona' make wonderful mash and the 'Maris Piper' is tops for superb chips. 'Picasso' produces big floury potatoes just right for baking. The 'Lady Balfour' variety sounds like a heritage potato but in fact it was introduced quite recently in 2001. It was bred by the Scottish Crop Research Institute. It was named after the founder of the Soil Association. It performs well under low fertility conditions giving high yields. It has good disease resistance and has partial double eelworm resistance. It was meant to appeal to the organic gardener. Though the mild flavour is and not to everyone's taste.



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Potatoes like a good fertile ericaceous soil. 'Acidic'. If planted out in an 'Alkaline' soil the potatoes would develop common scab. Scab is unsightly and would not be acceptable for show potatoes but in fact it does not impair the eating quality. Before sowing I apply 4 oz of Vitax Organic potato fertiliser to each meter run of the potato trench. 'It is important to apply a fertiliser high in potash'. Then I turn over the soil using my Honda Mantis cultivator to create a shallow trench. Dibber holes 12" apart and 6" deep. Then pop a little peat or compost into each hole and nestle the tuber in. Draw back the top soil to bury the potatoes 4" deep. When the foliage is 9" tall draw the soil up to the plants to create a flat topped ridge. 'Main crop potatoes should be planted 15" apart'.

Exhibition growing.

Potatoes prepared for sowing. In order to produce exhibition potatoes of the right size most of the eyes are removed. In this way we should end up with fewer but larger tubers. I tend to leave two of the side shoots and gouge out the rest with a teaspoon.



Last year I gave away my stock of the 'Amour' variety of potato as I was led to believe they would be available from JBA potatoes. Unfortunately I was caught out because there was a crop failure and 'Amour' will not now be available until 2019.

Now in the past 'Amour' has done very well for me on the show bench. I even managed to beat potato supremo Sherie Plumb using them in my winning dish in the coloured class at the NVS Southern Branch Championships in 2016.

So who better person to ask if she had any 'Amour' to spare. Such is the generosity of some of our members that in no time at all a few select examples were delivered to my door.

My sincere thanks to the Plumbs.



As 'Amour' is an early main cropper I have kept them in the warm kitchen on the windowsill to force the sprouts on a bit.



Making the exhibition potato compost.

The ingredients for the mix. To every 100litres of good quality fine peat is added 1lb of Vitax Q4 and 8oz of ground Calcified Seaweed. (note that the quantity of calcified seaweed has been reduced from the 1lb used in previous years.) The two fertilisers were mixed together in the pink bowl. To this I add 1 gallon of fine vermiculite.

Making potato compost is a time consuming occupation. I had considered buying in ready made but the consensus of informed opinion is that better results come from mixing your own.



The way I do it is to half fill a builders bucket with peat, to which I add a good hand full of the mixed fertiliser and two hand full's of vermiculite. Mix together by hand and top up with more of the peat. Give another hand mix

and put through the shredder. This will removed any lumps in the compost and help to mix it up once again. I find that seven bucket full's will equate to 100 litres of peat.

The prepared compost is then put back into the peat bags. I find that the 100 litres you started with will now fill a 200 litre bag. Give each bag a gallon of water and store until required.

I like to use rain water but if you have to use the stuff from the tap gives the bags a couple of days with the tops open to allow any chemicals to dissipate.

Most exhibitors these days use black polybags in which to grow their potatoes. The most common size used is 17 litres but I have seen excellent results come from those grown in 10 litre bags. If using the 17 litre size, then 100 litres of compost will fill 5.5 bags. Something to bear in mind if cost is a consideration.

The first thing I do before filling the bags with compost is to write the name of the variety and date sown. These wipe off chalk pens do the job very well.

This bag was saved from last season. I try to save the bags if I can. Mind you if the bag is very full of potatoes it will probably be necessary to cut the bag down the side in order to get the potatoes out without damaging their skins.

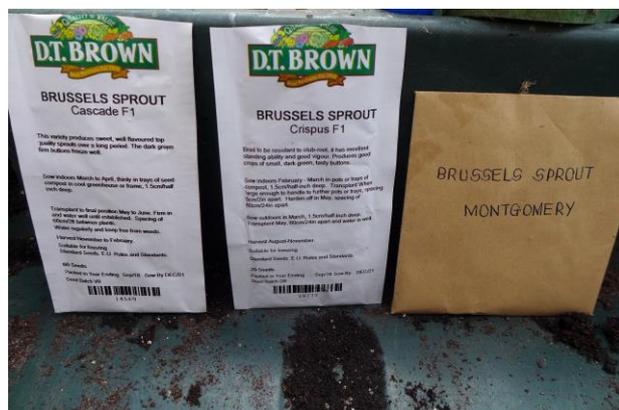


The potatoes are planted 4" below the surface of the compost. Once they have all been potted up they go into the polytunnel until weather conditions are suitable to set them out on the allotment.

[More on potatoes in the next article.](#)

There is one other vegetable that I have reintroduced to the Southern Branch NVS Championships and that is **Long Beetroot**. A few days ago I sowed mine in barrels filled with compost. They need a minimum of 16 weeks growth, so if you want to have a go get cracking this weekend.

At the end of March I sow the Brussels Sprout Sprout. The 'Crispus' variety is the one to sow if you have a problem with club root in your soil. All of these have been sown into seed trays and will be pricked out into 3" pots to grow on before planting out in May.



'Ferline' tomatoes. Last weekend, 23rd March I potted these up into 10 litre pots filled with a mix of loam and Levingtons M3 compost. I have introduced a class for beefsteak tomatoes at the New Forest Show. I hope that I shall get a decent dish off these plants. On 30th March I noticed the first flower trusses forming. That means we can look forward to our first ripe fruits in May.



On the Allotment. In the green house the 'Marathon' calabrese are just starting to form a head. In the milder, wet weather, I was able to plant out a row of ball headed cabbage. A liberal sprinkle of slug pellets was laid down to dissuade the mollusc's. A net was then placed



over the cabbage to keep off the pigeons.

My greenhouse is filling up with seed trays, which meant the hardier vegetables like the leeks, onions and broad beans have been moved to the polytunnel to create a little more space. At this time of year it is very much a balancing act.

I will wind up this article with a little tip from my neighbour Ann.

French Beans. For faster germination start them off in a seed tray lined with damp kitchen towel. Pop into a plastic bag and leave somewhere warm. In three days the beans will germinate.



Pot up straight away with the shoot pointing downwards. Be careful as the shoot is quite fragile.

Have a good Easter,

John Trim

