



Think about seed potatoes. Get properly certified seed, don't use potatoes bought for food as they may have been treated to prevent rots, suppress shooting and for long storage life.

Potatoes come in three kinds; First Earlies, ready for eating from 10 weeks, Second Earlies ready for eating in 13 weeks and Main Crop ready for eating from 20 weeks. First and Second Earlies are for eating as new potatoes straight from the ground. They will also store if you need the ground for other crops. Main Crop are for storing over winter. The three kinds are basically all the same, but the time they take to reach maturity is used to best advantage to match the season.

Think about how many potatoes you need, when you need them, and how much space you have. Potatoes are very cheap to buy, they take up a lot of growing room and can be susceptible to slugs and blight in a wet area like Cumbria. Earlies are always worth growing; the taste is so much better and the short growing time means they escape a lot of pests and diseases. There are a lot of varieties to choose from. It depends what you want to do with them – roasting, baking, salad etc. Waxy are good for salads and cookery where the potato retains its integrity. Floury disintegrate more but absorb flavour – so good for roasting and baking. The best salad potatoes are Pink Fir Apple and Ratte.

If you're not sure what you want, avoid buying large bags of one variety. Try finding a nursery which sells them loose. You can then pick out a few of each variety and try several to see which suit your tastes and soil. This is long term gardening; it can take years to work out what suits you, but one of the best bits of gardening is learning your patch and understanding changes in the soil and growing environment. The varieties should be described at point of sale and bags

and pens for labelling are usually provided. Aero Nurseries on the B7076 at Harker, north of Carlisle, are good for this.

Seed potatoes need to chit – encouraging the eyes to sprout into little stubby shoots before they are planted. Lay out the seed potatoes in a frost-free but cool and light place. The large square cardboard commercial egg trays are brilliant for this. Ask at cafés, they usually throw them away.

