

Why are the Potatoes Green?

by Heather Bryant, Extension Educator, Agricultural Resources

I got an interesting phone call the other day about green potatoes. Of course we all know potatoes are not meant to be green and most of us have made the mistake of eating one that was. If not, I don't recommend it because they taste incredibly bitter and they contain an alkaloid that would be poisonous in large doses. But what causes it? Sunlight is the most common cause, but did you know that artificial light can create the same problem?

This piece of information solved the mystery for the caller and from there the discussion of green potatoes quickly turned to more general potato harvest issues. It turns out, like many other crops from hay to raspberries, potatoes are early this year. According to several local growers, the earliest varieties are mature already and yields have been good. If this continues, those of you who have recently taken up gardening may be thinking about storing your own potatoes for the first time.

The same way onion tops conveniently flop over to tell you when the bulbs are mature, potato vines will die when the tubers are mature. If your potatoes are late and you want to hurry them along just cut the vines. At this point you can go ahead and harvest some to eat right away, but the ones you intend to store you want to leave in the ground for another two weeks. This will allow their skins to "toughen up".

Next, you want to dig them up and sort them, remembering to keep them in the shade as much as possible. If you can, choose a cool day for digging the potatoes. The ideal temperatures for harvest are between 45° and 60° F. Any bruised or damaged tubers should be set aside to either compost or eat right away. The rest you will want to "cure" in a cool (50-60° F) shady spot for 10-14 days. 95% relative humidity (ie humid) is ideal for curing potatoes, which is why they tend to do so well in unheated basements. Unheated basements also make a good site for long term storage. Ideal conditions are damp, humid and 37-40° F.

My caller and I ended our discussion with the question "to wash or not wash" the potatoes prior to putting them in storage. I did not find a lot of consensus on this topic, but according to the Idaho Potato Commission, excessive dampness can lead to rot. Also washing may lead to bruising, therefore, and particularly for potatoes from your own garden, I would recommend against washing before storing. After all you are going to wash them before you cook them anyway, so why do it twice?

As a final note on the green potatoes, you can cut out the green parts and eat the rest, but I recommend you cut a little beyond the green zone, just to make sure. For more information on growing potatoes, please visit http://extension.unh.edu/resources/representation/Resource000606_Rep628.pdf.

Look for next week's column by our County Forester, David Falkenham.

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