

How do you choose your potato varieties?

Summary

As a nation of potato eaters, we can be very particular about growing the perfect spud. Garden Organic surveyed 180 people about how they chose their potato varieties. Quality definitely rules over quantity for our members. Nearly everybody liked to choose a named varieties rather than just settling for whatever was available. The top 3 most important attributes were flavour, texture and resistance to blight. Blight is still very much on the radar, and some even stated that it was a wasted effort trying to grow blight susceptible varieties in their area. The importance of blight resistance depends very much on locality: warmer, wetter areas are hit harder (bad luck for the South West) and if you have more potato crops grown nearby, that also increases the risk. Yield was far less important being 5th on the priority list – most people were trying to grow high quality produce that tasted better than anything they could get from the shops.

Sourcing organic potato seed was a challenge for many, with a number of comments on the restricted range of varieties readily available.

Full report

Earlier this year we sent out a survey to Garden Organic members to find out what factors influenced their choices of potato varieties. A total of 180 people took part in the survey.

Sourcing seed

We wanted to what extent people bought seed potatoes or if they used other sources such as home saved seed or even shop bought potatoes. A total of 94% people bought seed potatoes, but 20% also saved their own. Only 8% used shop bought potatoes. The advice to use seed potatoes, is not given just to boost the profits of gardening catalogues but to minimise the spread of potato diseases for everybody.

Seed potatoes are not just small sized potato tubers. They have been grown under carefully managed conditions from disease-free stock in isolated locations to minimise the spread of viral and fungal diseases. Repeatedly saving your own seeds of potatoes is not a recommended practice as there is a strong risk that they that they will become infected with diseases, especially virus which are carried between places by aphids. This will not only infect your own crops in subsequent years, but your crops will be acting as a reservoir that will infect other people's potatoes in the locality.

Organic seed and varieties

Just over half of participants (57%) stated that they would buy organic seed when it was available, with only 19% stating that they would only buy organic seed. A number of people commented that the choice of organic varieties was restricted, so many would not be prepared to sacrifice their favourite choice of variety in order to obtain organic seed. Being able to grow

a specific variety was an important factor with 95% stating that they liked to choose a specific variety as opposed to growing whatever was available.

Attributes

Flavour, texture and blight resistance were the three most important factors for choosing potato varieties. Flavour was by far the most important, with 99% of participants stating that this was either important or very important. Texture was also important to 80% of people, choosing specific varieties with floury or waxy flesh for specific culinary use.

The importance of blight resistance depends on the locality: milder wetter areas such as the south west are more likely to have a higher incidence of blight, but also areas with a lot of potato crops around tend to have higher incidence of the disease. Some people stated that it was a 'wasted effort' to grow varieties that were susceptible to blight, whereas some would take their chance by mixing and matching a few older varieties with preferred flavour with more modern varieties with better resistance. Storage was important to just under two thirds of participants, although a good number only grew early varieties, either though preference or specifically to avoid blight. Yield was lower down on the priority list, with most people growing for flavour and quality rather than volume. One person stated that they had didn't want to grow varieties that you could buy in large quantities cheaply in the shop.

Slug resistance was important to over half that participants. The importance of this depends on climate and soil type. One person commented that the varieties that claimed good slug resistance usually had thicker skins. Early maturity was only important to a minority, although it was mentioned a few times in the comments as being a desirable characteristic, especially for those growing in blight susceptible areas. Lastly, having a well-respected name was important to less than a third of participants, although one person lamented the disappearance of older varieties that had better flavour.

