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Question:

How does one grow potatoes in straw?

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Answer::

Even a couch potato can grow a good potato crop. By using straw and a little soil preparation up front, it's easy to grow an admirable crop in a limited space. And few crops yield more than the potato. Start by choosing an early maturing variety such as Norgold Russet or Superior (a white potato) at your local garden center. Avoid the temptation to buy potatoes for planting from the supermarket. These potatoes may be treated with sprout inhibitors or may carry disease organisms to contaminate your garden soil. Choose egg size tubers or cut larger potatoes into two or three seed pieces, each with an "eye" or sprout. Make cuts the day before planting and let the cut surfaces dry or "heal" at room temperature overnight. Loose, well-drained soil with a generous amount of organic material is ideal for potatoes. Garden compost makes an excellent

soil amendment to mix in after deep digging. Compost keeps the freshly fluffed up soil from recompacting. Decide on the length of your row and dig a trench four inches deep and 12 inches wide. Plant potatoes four-to-six weeks before the last frost which means April in the Denver area. Place seed pieces in the trench with the cut side down or orient whole potatoes with the eye facing up. Push seed one-half inch into the loose soil in the bottom of the trench and space 12 inches apart. Fill the trench with six inches of clean, weed-free straw -- not dirt. As potato plants emerge, add another four-to-six inches of straw. Water as needed to keep the straw evenly moist, but not soggy. Do not overwater. Straw promotes healthy plant growth, smothers weeds and protects tubers from turning green in the sunlight. The straw also acts as a mulch to keep the soil moist. In August, you can begin harvesting clean, soil-free "new potatoes." Simply pull back the straw, take what you need and carefully replace the straw. After fall frosts when the vines die back, your main potato crop is ready. Here is a most satisfying part of growing potatoes in straw. Not one spud is sacrificed to slits from digging. In fact, no digging is necessary -- just scoop them out! Text: Steve Healy, Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Photo: Podchef

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