

Potato

By Marketa Janouchova



Latin: *Solanum tuberosum*
Irish: Práta

Where do potatoes come from?

The first potatoes came from the Peruvian Andes in South America. These wild potatoes were collected by Andean farmers some 8,000 years ago from a high plateau that stretches between Cusco and Lake Titicaca. However, it was farmers in the Central Andes that were able to successfully farm potatoes and it is these varieties that made their way to Europe. Brought over by Spanish conquistadors (explorers) in the beginning of the 16th century, they were first introduced in Spain and then in different parts of Europe.

Are there many varieties of potato?

Nowadays we have many potato varieties to eat, some of them are more resistant to blight than others. The most commonly produced varieties in Ireland are Roosters, Kerr's Pink, Golden Wonder and the early variety British Queen. But there are many other less known varieties like May Queen, Sharpe's Express and Cara. There are even potatoes which are purple, blue or red inside! Worldwide there are about 5,000 varieties of potato. About 99% of those grown in Europe today originated from those farmed in the Central Andes. These varieties are better suited to our conditions than the original varieties from the Peruvian Andes.



Potatoes in Ireland

Potatoes, "spuds" or "tatties" became popular among poor people in many countries where other crops would fail. It is believed that the explorer Sir Walter Raleigh brought the first potatoes to Ireland. As they were easy to grow and provided the main nutrients, they served as a staple food in rural areas for almost a century. In 1845 potato crops in Ireland were affected by a fungal disease called "potato blight", which turned the potatoes black and into mush in the ground. The loss of the potato from people's diets, caused a great famine that lasted for seven years. More than a million people in Ireland died of hunger and another million left for America, hoping for a better life.

In Ireland today, potatoes are still very much part of our diet. However, with some many other types of food available us, we do not have to rely on them as much as our ancestors did.



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The leaves and flowers of the potato plant.

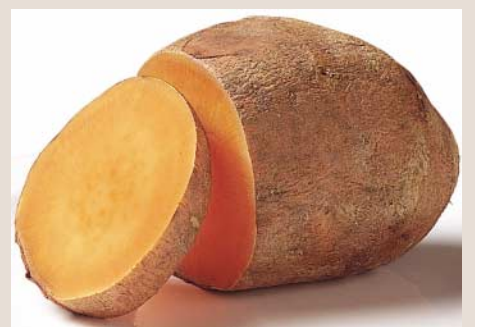
Potatoes & Poison

Potato plants are not harmless! When the plant's tubers (potatoes) are exposed to light, they turn green and they produce solanine, a natural poison that helps prevent the exposed tubers from being eaten. In high levels solanine is toxic to our bodies, so it is important not to eat green potatoes. Believe it or not potatoes actually belong to the same family as some of the most poisonous plants, such as Deadly Nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*), Thorn-apple (*Datura stramonium*) and Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*)!



Sweet potato

Sweet potatoes or "batatas", as they are called in Latin America, do not belong to the same family as potatoes. Though they resemble them, they are not even related! They grow in soil on the roots of a plant called *Ipomoea batatas* and are native to tropical areas of America. A creeping vine, the plant can grow up to 3m tall and has beautiful trumpet-like flowers - very much like our Bindweed (*Calystegia sepium*). It grows in tropical countries and would not survive outside in our climate.



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