

Potatoes

Tuesday, April 13, 2010

Version:1.0 StartHTML:0000000191 EndHTML:0000003062 StartFragment:0000002372
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The potatoes are tucked into the soft ground up on the Purcell Hill. We use potatoes to build better soil. This year we planted 1700 pounds of seed potatoes.

The fields were well composted and turned last fall. The land was hard packed, it hadn't been plowed in a generation or more. A typical ridge, the clay was yellow and the top soil thin; allowing plenty of room for improvement.

Early in the spring we rebroke it with the chisel plow, and I decided it needed more compost. Easter weekend found me spreading another 33 loads and plowing it in, finishing up by headlights.

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Spud cutting had been going on, and by the afternoon of the next day we had those planted. A piece is dropped in a furrow, stepped on, and then another dropped a foot in front and on down the row we go. Back on the porch we cut up til 11:00 that night.

I take off the seed end first, and then find the stem on what's left. I don't want to mistake the stem for an eye. Each piece should be the same size of a hen's egg and have an eye or two.

You can't sleep late here with all the racket the birds make at first light. They are excited, too. By the end of this day all the rows are planted, stepped on and covered up.

I'll harrow over the rows in about ten days, and then keep them cultivated. At the final cultivation, I'll put disc hillers on the tractor and throw soil up around the vines. Hilling potatoes keeps them from having those green spots, which are not good to eat. It also helps me know where the row is when we dig them.

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Once they're out of the soil, I start planting cover crops. Buckwheat is a favorite, it loves to grow in the summertime. By mid August I want crimson clover and daikon radish planted, too. Depending on when the potatoes are harvested, the cover crops are planted separately or all at once. I prefer the latter, which I do by putting an ounce of daikon and a quart of crimson clover with four gallons of buckwheat and broadcasting it over about a quarter acre.

Because the land was in a healthy sod, despite its hardness clay and low fertility, a lot of fungal activity develops as the sod rots over winter. The compost really helps by bringing in more microbes. By keeping the soil loose, fluffy, and well composted, potato beetles aren't interested. They are looking for potatoes growing where the soil lacks humus. We control them by insuring the soil is humus-rich.

The potatoes stored from last July are firm and perfectly edible. No wrinkles and ugly sprouts, but the eyes are white and lively. Potassium fertilizers makes potatoes grow but they don't store near as well.. I don't want water soluble fertilizers at all, they mess things up.

We'll let the buckwheat mobilize potassium and calcium, the diakons and their unique microbes can help with phosphorus and sulfur, and the clover brings in nitrogen. The land will then be ready for more gardens.