

Conservation Corner

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*One potato, two potatoes, three potatoes, four!
Five potatoes, six potatoes, seven potatoes, more!*

This jump rope jingle from my youth will introduce this week's plant friend – the tasty potato. High in vitamins and minerals, potatoes are also a good source of carbohydrates. Potatoes are also versatile. Baked, boiled, fried, grilled, mashed, riced, or scalloped, served up in potato salad or potato soup, or snacked on as potato chips or French fries – just a few of the countless ways to enjoy potatoes.

Potatoes, *Solanum tuberosum*, are herbaceous perennials whose leaves die back after the plant has flowered, borne fruit, and formed tubers. Did you know that, in general, white flowers bear white-skinned potatoes while pink, red, blue, or purple flowers produce pink or red-skinned potatoes? Potato plants are both self-fertilized and cross pollinated by insects such as bumble bees. Potatoes, along with tobacco, eggplants, and tomatoes, are members of the nightshade family which are known for their toxic compounds. These glycoalkaloids, present in the leaves, stems, sprouts and fruits, protect the plants from predators.

Potatoes are the fourth largest food crop in the world behind rice, wheat, and corn. First domesticated and cultivated in Peru by Inca Indians some 10,000 years ago, potatoes arrived in southern Europe via Spanish explorers and the Columbian Exchange. Sir Water Raleigh introduced the potato to Ireland in 1589. The rest, as they say, is history. And while Europe is still a major producer of potatoes, China had led the world in potato production for the past ten years.

Last weekend we enjoyed an evening at the Fonda Arts Center listening to Jerry Barlow, a Celtic fingerstyle guitarist. Several of the songs he shared were part of a Smithsonian Institute exhibit that highlights the life and music of immigrants, including the 1 million Irish who came to America during the Potato Famine of 1845-50. The haunting melodies and lyrics echoed the hunger, death, and diaspora of the Irish people who left their homes and families in the hope of starting over in America.

Here in Iowa, weather and ground conditions permitting, many people plant potatoes on Good Friday. And while some folklore is just that, this adage does have some science behind it. At full and new moons, the earth, sun, and moon are aligned, causing not only high ocean tides but also the rise and fall of soil moisture in the ground. As Easter Sunday falls on the first Sunday after the paschal or first full moon following the spring equinox, Good Friday will fall in the dark or waning of the moon, a period of energy drawing down and entering the roots. Do you plant "by the moon"?

Not everyone believes in planting potatoes on Good Friday. The Creoles of Louisiana think that by cutting the ground open on this holy day Christ's blood will run out into the rows, a rather unsettling image.

I'll close on a more cheerful note: Don't forget to do something good for our home planet this coming Saturday, Earth Day!

