



THE POTATO

The potato is an edible tuber of the Potato plant *Solanum tuberosum*. A tuber is the swollen region of an underground stem or root. It is enlarged to store nutrients and allows plants to re-grow the following season.

Potatoes originally come from high in the Andes Mountain range of South America. Here on the borders of Peru and Bolivia potatoes have been cultivated by people as a food for around 8000 years. A staggering 5000 different varieties are still grown there today, sometimes hundreds of types in a single valley.

Various South American civilisations, including the Incas, used the potato as a staple food. Invading Spanish Conquistadors first brought some back to Spain in 1597 and their cultivation quickly spread throughout Europe. Firstly grown only as animal feed, it took Europeans about a hundred years to start growing them to cook and eat themselves. Potatoes arrived Down Under on the First Fleet in 1788 and have been successfully grown and enjoyed in Australia ever since.

Many millions of people rely on the potato as a food. Potatoes are the fourth largest fresh food crop in the world after rice, wheat and maize (corn). China is the world's biggest producer of potatoes. Potatoes are Australia's largest vegetable crop. We produce about 1.31 million tons a year.

As they are a good source of carbohydrates potatoes are a great source of energy. Potatoes also contain every vital nutrient apart from Vitamin A, D and calcium. In the past people have in fact lived on just potatoes and milk.

The potato is such a versatile food and can be cooked and eaten in an amazing variety of ways – boiled, fried, roasted, grilled. It can be eaten whole, chipped, chopped, grated, mashed, hot or cold. They are most famously deep fried and eaten as French fries or chips. Millions of tons are consumed every year, and they are still used as an animal feed, especially for pigs and cattle.

Different varieties of potato have subtle differences in flavour, texture and appearance. Some are good eaten young and small (new potatoes), others when older and larger. Some popular varieties in Australia include: Ruby Lou, Desiree, Kipfler.

It is easy to grow your own potatoes. Simply plant a potato (preferably one that has already produced sprouts) in a mound of soil and keep it well watered. After about 150 days you should have a crop of around 10 to 20 potatoes.

The United Nations have declared 2008 as the "Year of the Potato" to increase awareness of the importance of the potato as a food in developing nations.