

Gardening with kids – Potato Tower

(from University of Minnesota Extension)

There's something timeless about digging for buried treasure that every kid enjoys, regardless of age. And potato harvesting is a treasure hunt! You know there are spuds hidden in the soil, but it's always a surprise to unearth their varied shapes, sizes, and colors, and see the amount of your harvest.

If you don't have garden space for potatoes, don't worry — you can grow them in towers! Potato towers are a productive and space-saving way to harvest some fresh spuds. Plus, this technique is easier on your back and more fun for your kids. Here's how to build a potato tower.

1. Using chicken wire, heavy-gauge wire, or wooden fencing, make a cylinder that's 2 or 3 feet in diameter and 3 or 4 feet tall. Secure the cylinder with wire fasteners.
2. Ideally, place the cylinder on cultivated ground in a location that gets at least 6 hours of sun a day, and that's close to the house and a water spigot.
3. If your cylinder is made from wire, line the inside of the cage with hay, straw, cardboard, or newspaper to prevent the soil from falling through the gaps. All of these materials will decompose during the growing season, adding to the fertility of your tower.
4. Put a 4-inch-thick layer of compost in the bottom of the cylinder.
5. You'll need 4 or 5 seed potatoes (or pieces), each containing at least 3 —eyes. □ Place the potatoes on top of the compost, 6 inches apart. Don't use grocery store potatoes because these varieties may be susceptible to disease and have usually been treated with sprout inhibitors. Consider growing different-colored potato varieties to give your kids a real thrill. Select varieties such as "All Blue", "All Red", and "Yukon Gold".
6. Cover the potatoes with a 3- to 4-inch-thick layer of soil. Water well. (
7. As the potato plants grow, cover them with more compost. To save money, you can also use a mix of compost and topsoil or potting soil.
8. When the soil line is 6 inches below the top of the cylinder, stop adding soil and let the potato plants continue to grow. Keep well watered.
9. By later summer the plants should begin to yellow — your signal that it's time to harvest
10. Have your kids remove the wire fasteners holding the potato tower together and watch as the soil and spuds come tumbling out.
11. After removing the spuds, save the soil for use in another container or spread it in your garden.

Your kids will be impressed with your harvest — you should find 10 to 20 new potatoes per plant! Cure the tubers in a 50° to 60°F room out of direct sun for two weeks. Then store them in a cool (40°F) basement or garage for up to 6 months, depending on the variety.