

<http://www.grit.com/food/heirloom-potatoe-varieties-zm0z13jfgou.aspx>

Potatoes, by Lawrence Davis-Hollander, ©2015

Potatoes are the most widely consumed vegetable in the United States and, after corn, wheat and rice, the fourth most consumed food crop in the world. While the West has been the biggest producer of potatoes, that distinction now belongs to the developing world with China leading the pack.

In the United States, per capita consumption fluctuates and is currently on the decline, but we each still manage to wolf down around 130 pounds of potatoes each year. However, when it comes to really enjoying potatoes, that distinction goes to Belarus, where 350 pounds are eaten per person annually. In 2003, the United States ranked 38th in per-capita consumption, trailing Russia, the other countries of the former Soviet Union, England, and many more.

All in the Family

The potato, *Solanum tuberosum*, is a member of the Solanaceae, or nightshade family, which includes many poisonous species and some common edible crops like tomatoes, peppers, eggplants and tomatillos, all of which are fruits. Other edible solanaceous fruits include wonderberry, Turkish eggplant, tree tomato and naranjilla.

The exact origin of the potato remains controversial today. The domesticated potato had its origins possibly between 7,000 and 10,000 years ago at elevations ranging from 4,000 to 12,000 feet in the Andes Mountains of South America, probably in Peru and Bolivia in the Lake Titicaca region. While some archeological evidence points to an even earlier consumption of wild species, many authorities believe that solid evidence of domesticated varieties does not occur until 4,000 years ago. In the Andes region, there are literally thousands of varieties in all different shapes and colors, and here is the greatest diversity of both wild species and cultivated varieties.

What we do know is that Spanish explorers introduced the Andean variety of potatoes to their homeland by 1570, and soon thereafter the potato reached southern Europe. The plant quickly spread across much of Europe, and it was illustrated in many of the 16th-century herbals.

Cultivation of Heirloom Potato Varieties

Gradually farmers began cultivating potatoes and creating new varieties. Northern European farmers selected varieties for early harvest, adaptability to the long-day summer conditions, and the climate.

The potato's adoption in eastern Europe and Russia was slower, partly because of the belief that the potato was a plant of the devil. Forced planting of potatoes by the Russian government resulted in potato riots, but by the end of the 19th century the plant was firmly entrenched as a Russian staple. Potatoes were introduced to the United States in the early 18th century.

The greatest impediment to the cultivation of potatoes — aside from their association with a widely recognized poisonous plant family — was that the original Andean varieties introduced into Europe were adapted to the shorter day length of their South American origins, only producing tubers when the days were about 12 hours long with a longer period of darkness, an occurrence that does not happen in northern Europe until too late in the season. This confined the production of tubers to southern Europe.

Recent evidence indicates that the long-day varieties — requiring more than 12 hours of daylight and fewer hours of darkness — from Chile were probably introduced much earlier than previously thought, and these varieties, along with hybrids of both the short-day and long-day types, began forming the basis of the modern “northern” potato.

While strong blight resistance did not appear in potatoes before the 20th century, the eventual development of new long-day length varieties offered sufficient resistance and earlier yields to revive potato cultivation. The consequence of this is that there are no northern heirloom varieties from before the middle of the 19th century, although plenty persist from South America.

Heirloom Varieties

Around 1851, Chauncy Goodrich, a minister from Utica, New York, decided to find a better potato. He obtained a number of clones through the consulate in Panama. One of these varieties, Rough Purple Chili, was the most promising. It is likely this variety originated from Chile, possibly brought to Panama on California-bound ships.

Working over a number of years, Goodrich developed many new varieties, notably Garnet Chili and Early Rose. Rough Purple became the progenitor for more than 100 North American cultivars.

Most potato varieties on the commercial market today are not heirlooms. A number of 19th-century varieties are still available — seed exchanges are good places to find such cultivars. Be aware that if you are not getting certified virus-free potatoes, there is a good chance that yields may be reduced and the variety may “run down.”

I’ll mention just a few now; there are many more to seek out.

Green Mountain is a wonderful, irregularly oblong, buff skinned and unusually flavorful variety bred in 1885 by O.H. Alexander in the Green Mountains of Vermont. One of the varieties used for the original potato chip, it is well worth growing even though it is fairly susceptible to a host of potato diseases.

Burbank potatoes were bred by Luther Burbank in 1874 from seeds found on a plant of Early Rose, which he then sold to John Gregory of the J.J.H. Gregory Seed Co. of Marblehead, Massachusetts, for \$150. Gregory named that strain “Burbank’s Seedling.” Today, Burbank is by far the most widely grown potato in the United States, mainly for french fries. What is typically grown is Russet Burbank, which is not the original type but a chance mutation discovered in 1914. Russet Burbank also is known as the Idaho potato.

The original Burbank is long, with smooth brown skin, and is relatively mealy, ideal for baking. The original and the Russet variety are late maturing and heavy yielding under ideal conditions.

Irish Cobbler (or just Cobbler) is a small, round, early-producing variety that is great for roasting or mashing, as it possesses a wholesome, creamy texture. It supposedly was developed by an Irish shoemaker in Massachusetts. It was introduced in 1876 and was selected from seeds produced by Early Rose.

Several heirloom fingerlings worth noting include a French variety, La Ratte, which originated in the late 19th century. La Ratte boasts yellow skin and smooth, firm flesh with a kind of tapering, chunky shape. It produces medium-low yields, yet is well worth growing for its superb texture. This one originated in the late 19th century in France.

Russian Banana, also with yellow skin and flesh, is said to have originated in the Baltic region, and this variety yields more heavily than La Ratte, with fat fingerlike tubers.

Among my personal favorites is Ruby Crescent, also known as Rose Finn Apple, which has a rosy yellow skin, yellow flesh, and an excellent rich buttery taste. It tends to produce “wings,” or knobs, giving the tubers an odd appearance. It is a late season plant, producing small yields.

Be careful when seeking out heirloom potatoes: They are so relatively easy to grow and keep, and they have such varied tastes and textures that you may find yourself with a collection — one that grows and grows.