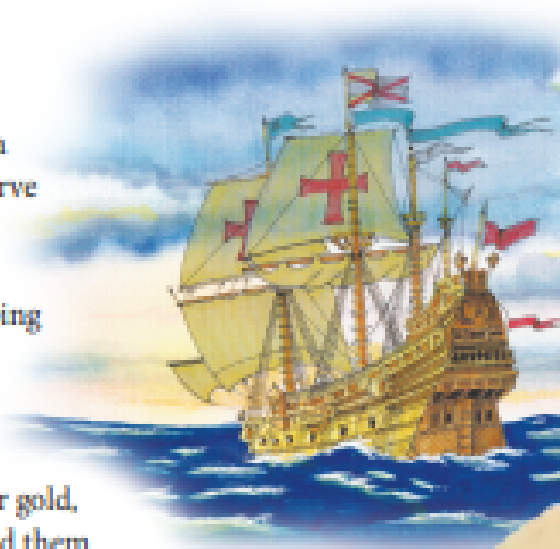


The Humble Potato

Where it all began

Potatoes were first grown for food in South America thousands of years ago. People found a way to preserve them by leaving them out at night in the cold and then warming them in the sun the following day. During the day, the potatoes were crushed by stamping on them. After doing this for five days, 'chuno' (a potato pulp) was made which could be stored and kept for up to ten years in case crops failed.

In 1532 Spanish traders, who had been searching for gold, brought potatoes back from South America and used them on board ships as food. It was not long before farmers in Spain began to grow what they called 'patatas' and the potato spread across the rest of Europe. They were regarded with suspicion, however, and many people thought they weren't suitable for humans to eat, partly because of their odd shape. In some places, they were grown just as food for animals.



How the potato arrived in Britain



Sir Walter Raleigh

There are different opinions about how the potato came to Britain in the late 1500s.

One view is that Spanish fishermen ate potatoes on their fishing trips to the North Sea. On their way home, they would land in Ireland to put salt on the cod they had caught to stop it rotting. It is believed that the sailors gave some of their potatoes to the farmers who grew them in the rich Irish soil.

Another view is that Sir Walter Raleigh, an explorer who went to the Americas many times, brought potatoes back to his Irish farm and planted them there.

It is said that he gave a potato plant to Queen Elizabeth I as a gift, and to celebrate, a royal feast was held to eat the potatoes. Legend has it that the cooks threw away the potatoes and instead served up the boiled stems and leaves (which are poisonous). This made everyone very ill and potatoes were then banned from the royal menu.

Potatoes today – good to eat and good to grow!

Potatoes are very popular today and, despite what some people think, they are also good for you.

A baked potato contains a surprisingly large amount of vitamin C – and more fibre than two slices of wholemeal bread.

Potatoes also provide carbohydrates and other important nutrients like vitamin B6. They are low in fat too, provided you don't fry them or add lots of butter!



Potatoes are easy to grow. This makes them a perfect crop for farmers in the developing world, who can grow a nutritious food in poor soil. There are plenty of different varieties to choose from and they usually produce a good harvest.

Grow Your Own Potatoes Project

In 2005 the Grow Your Own Potatoes Project was started.

It was one of the first projects to encourage primary schools to grow their own food. Since then it has become the largest of its kind, with almost 1 million children taking part by 2010.

In 2011 the winning school had a child on frost watch at the end of every school day and if there was a chance of frost at night they brought their pots of potatoes indoors. No wonder they were winners!



Potato facts

British people are the third largest consumers of potatoes in Europe.

The potato was the first vegetable to be grown in space.

Potatoes can be converted into fuel for cars.

One of the largest potatoes ever grown weighed in at 3.2 kilograms – the weight of a small dog!