

MARTHA STEWART Living

AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER 1992

summer
entertaining

50 recipes for
cool-down menus
decorating ideas
for outdoor life
GARDEN PARTY HOW-TO

\$5.00 USA
(CAN. \$4.00)



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Have you noticed all those stories about the “fashionable” potato? Funny, we never knew it had gone out of style. We can’t imagine a summer picnic without potato salad, or steak without a crusty baked potato. We’re delighted by the newly available varieties, from Daku Round to Caribe to Purple Peruvian, but even the most “exotic” of them have been with us for a long, long time—thousands of years, in fact.

POTATOES

Like the tomato, its relative in the nightshade family, the potato is an American original. It traveled with returning Spanish conquistadores from the New World, where it was first cultivated by the Incas, to Europe, where it was deeply distrusted for the better part of two centuries. Europeans thought all tubers (which are not roots, as commonly believed, but underground food-storage units for the green plants above) were poisonous; indeed, some are. Its membership in the nightshade family made the potato even more suspect, since the black sheep of the family is “deadly.”

Eventually, Europeans overcame their suspicions. When potato crops were good, they fed armies and allowed the laboring classes to flourish as never before. When the crops were struck by blight, a fungus that spreads rapidly, mass starvation resulted. Like corn, another New World crop being celebrated in this quincentennial year, the potato changed populations, the course of wars, and the growth of countries, including our own. At least one million Irish died during the terrible potato famine of the mid-nineteenth century, and one and a quarter million or so emigrated to the United States to escape starvation.

Potatoes grow not from seeds but from the eyes of the potatoes themselves. Growers preserve potato sections over the winter, then plant them. Today dedicated farmers are trying to popularize just a fraction of the thousands of varieties the Incas knew, showing us how varied and unexpect-

edly flavorful potatoes can be. Their task is difficult, because potatoes are so vulnerable to viruses, bacteria, and fungi that many farmers don’t even bother with them; for organic farmers, the task is doubly difficult.

The varieties that have caught on fastest with growers and cooks are purple potatoes, because their color is so striking, and fingerlings, because they taste so good. The only purple potato we’ve encountered that’s actually worth eating is the sweet, dense, yamlike Purple Peruvian. Most others are watery and dull. Fingerlings, so named for their long, thin shape, are another story. Most have a warm yellow or ivory-colored flesh; they are firm when sliced, like waxy new potatoes, but they also have some of the dry, floury qualities of Idaho baking potatoes.

Like any other vegetable, the potato is seasonal, something we forget when we rely on two or three varieties from the supermarket. And their season will soon be upon us: potatoes are harvested in September and October, but their flavor lasts into the new year. The best fingerlings, such as Ruby Crescent and Ozette Indian, have so much flavor—sweet, nutty, earthy, and even buttery, a quality many people mistakenly ascribe to any yellow-fleshed potato—that you’ll want to eat them simply steamed, with nothing more than a snipping of herbs and perhaps a drizzle of olive oil, according them the honor of being brought to the table as a separate course. You’ll find that they merit the tribute.

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The photographs on these pages were taken at Mountain Sweet Farm in Cooks Falls, New York. The farmers, Rick Bishop and Franca Tantillo, are among the passionately devoted few who grow unusual varieties of potatoes using only organic methods. They say that the rich flavor, bright color, and dense texture of their potatoes come from various minerals regularly blended into the soil. Rick and Franca's potatoes can be bought only at local farmers' markets (their stall is one of the most popular at the Union Square Greenmarket in New York City), but you'll find varieties they sell at other small growers around the country. (See "The Guide" for sources.)

1. **Daku Round**, a purple potato with slashes of red and a moist, white flesh. 2. Rick and Franca in the fields. 3. **Caribes** being washed. 4. (clockwise from top) **Banana**, a yellow-fleshed fingerling named for its shape, with excellent flavor; **Early Ohio**, a potato with medium starch and a pleasantly earthy taste, which sustained settlers heading west; **Gloria**, a Dutch variety with firm, bright-yellow flesh; **Huckleberry**, a crimson potato whose bland flesh remains a dark pink when cooked. 5. **Caribe** (lower left), with white, creamy, delicately flavored flesh; **Papa Amarillo**, a Peruvian variety with waxy, yolk-colored flesh that South American mothers favor for their babies. 6. Purple Peruvian flowers.



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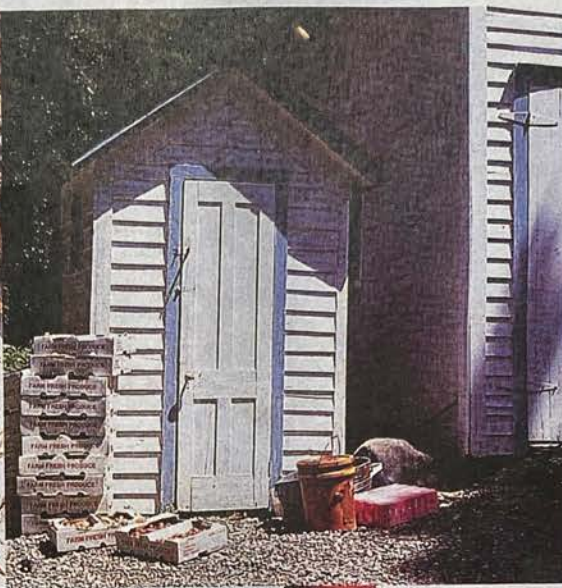
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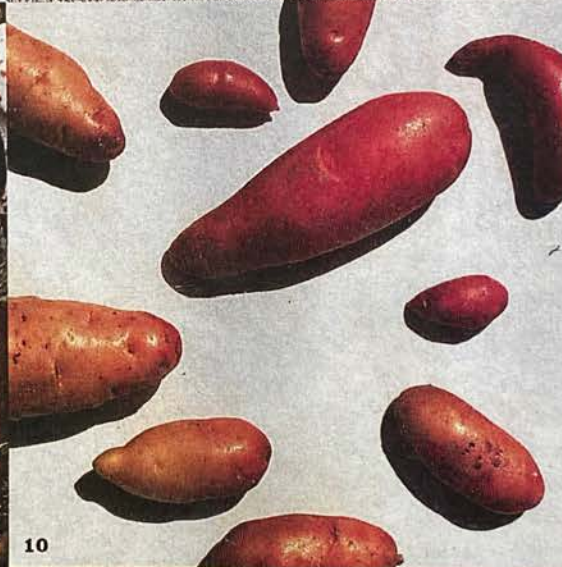
7. (clockwise from top) **Rosa Lund**, a medium-starch potato, ivory inside, with a hearty taste; **Cowhorn**, with mealy, cream-colored flesh, light-purple skin, and a rather uninteresting flavor; **Candy Stripe**, mottled despite its name and cream-fleshed (another potato with a taste that is blander than its appearance); **Ozette Indian**, a fingerling with superb, earthy flavor. Ozettes vie with Ruby Crescents for the attention of cooks inspired to try new kinds of potatoes. 8. Washing and storage sheds at the farm, with crates of potatoes ready for the market.

Come Thanksgiving there will be demand for more potatoes than the farm has land to grow them on.

9. Rick and Franca check a new crop. 10. **Red Mandel** (upper right), a waxy fingerling with a sweet, flowery taste; **Ruby Crescent** (pinkest when freshly picked), with yellow flesh and a buttery flavor, both sweet and sharp, that places it among the very best fingerlings. 11. (clockwise from top)



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10



11



12

Peanut, an old Scandinavian variety with a russet skin and lightly chestnutlike flavor; **Scamp**, with marbled purple-and-yellow flesh; **Kerr's Pink**, a waxy Scottish variety mild in flavor; **Cherries Jubilee**, a small potato whose sweet and crumbly flesh is a pretty, mottled magenta when cooked. Unlike most other colorful potatoes, it has a distinctive flavor.

12. Rick holds an **Ozette Indian** to show how fingerlings got their name.