

Useful Reusing

- How to grow potatoes in tyres



Used tyres are in plentiful supply and we find them very useful at Windmill. There are some provisos though. Tyres should be intact, with no areas that seem to be crumbling or cracked. This is because they contain cadmium, a poisonous metal, along with a variety of other chemicals that you wouldn't want to eat. Don't let that scare you though - when tyres are new, they degas some volatile chemicals, but by the time they are worn, these are largely gone or trapped by an oxidised layer. A small amount of cadmium comes out of the tyre as dust as the tyre wears, but when the tyre is intact, it should stay put. If the tyre begins to break up, there is a theoretical contamination risk, so that's the time to seal it in the wall of a building or get it officially disposed of. For the same reason, we wouldn't use ground tyres as path covering in the allotment. If you want more information on potential contaminants from tyres in allotments have a look here: <https://www.thespruce.com/are-tire-gardens-safe-growing-veggies-848043>

To make it work, you have to find the right kind of tyres - low profile ones will work better as there is more room in the middle for the potatoes.

At the beginning, you only need to plant the potatoes in the first tyre - 2 or 3 tubers per stack. Once they have grown about 20cm high shoots, the next tyre is placed over the first (low profile tyres make this process easier), and the potatoes are earthed up. This process continues as the potatoes grow, and another tyre is added. 3 or 4 tyres can be stacked in the tower. Our experiments show that the potatoes are not too choosy about what they grow in. We have had good results from straight soil, a mix of soil and partly rotted compost, and also a mix of soil and rotted bark-chippings from the path. The only mix that was less successful was fresh wood chip, though the



potatoes still cropped. The main limiting factor seems to be water, as the foliage of the potatoes tends to shed water over the side of the tyres. Because of this, we water them more often than other crops in pots, keeping a sharp eye out for them showing signs of moisture stress, like limp foliage. We also water them once or twice during the growing season with seaweed solution mixed with our own compost tea.

Harvesting is simple, as we just knock over the tyres onto a plastic sheet, and loosen the compost. Spent compost is put in a fresh compost heap and the tyres are used elsewhere in the garden. It's a good way to use up any wasted space and it helps stop the "forgotten potato" problem in the main beds,