

Early Season Potatoes

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Market research has shown that both fingerling and micro-sized potatoes could be grown as a high value alternative vegetable crop for retail in supermarkets, roadside stands, farmers markets, CSA's and possibly for pick-your-own operations and direct sales to restaurants. These speciality potatoes, new freshly dug "baby" potatoes, are valued by consumers for several reasons including freshness, taste, size, and shape. If methods for producing these types of potatoes could be developed so that they could be harvested in early July or by the July 4 weekend, then growers would be able to command high prices. There are also other novelty or health beneficial types of potato such as the red and purple flesh types reputed to be high in antioxidants, and certainly have high visual appeal and taste.

In one study we conducted a replicated experiment to determine the preferred cultural management for production of small-sized potatoes aiming for a harvest ready for market in early July. Two standard potato varieties, one white skinned (Superior) and one red skinned (Red Norland), were seeded on May 1, 2002 in three densities (3, 6, 9 inches between seed pieces), with and without row covers (May 4 to June 10). The thought behind this is that high densities will result in a greater abundance of small-sized potatoes, and that row covers during the early season when temperatures are cooler, will advance an earlier harvest. A shortened growing period may eliminate the need for fungicides because diseases are of greater concern later in the season. We believe this can be an attractive option for certain growers, including organic producers.

In the second study also planted May 1, Russian Banana, All Red, All Blue, and Yukon Gold were also planted for full season potatoes together with Red Norland.

The early "baby" potato study was harvested July 15. A second harvest of this study is planned for late July or early August. Results of the first harvest are shown in the graph.

