

Potatoes

Joe Saunders and Anna Cusack

The exact location of the homeland of the potato is a matter of dispute, although we do know they came from somewhere in the Andean Highlands and Spanish conquistadors appear to have found them in Peru in 1537. During the early sixteenth century the potato was introduced from the Americas to Europe where the first record of potatoes being planted is from 1543.¹ They were at first met with extreme opposition. Many people believed they were poisonous, caused leprosy, and were related to deadly nightshade.² Potatoes were first used as fodder for livestock, especially cattle and pigs.

In the seventeenth century, the potato was introduced into Ireland where it fared far better than elsewhere, both in its acceptance as a foodstuff and in its cultivation. Potatoes require a particular climate and amount of daylight in order to form decent tubers.³ This was found in Ireland from the outset, but the English climate proved more difficult until the potatoes were grown from seed and over several generations selected for yield and earliness. The potato then began to be successfully cultivated in western Lancashire and Cumbria. The mild climate and peaty soils of the reclaimed mosslands of Lancashire proved ideal. In the late seventeenth century the cultivation of the potato was as advanced on the Lancashire Plain as it would be in most of the rest of England a hundred years later.

¹ W. Langer, 'American Foods and Europe's Population Growth 1750-1850' *Journal of Social History* Vol. 8, No. 2 (Winter, 1975), 52.

² Langer, 'American Foods', 53.

³ J.G. Hawkes, 'The History of the Potato', *Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society*, 92 (1967).



Fresh uncleaned potatoes by *freefoodphotos.com* ([CC BY 3.0](#))

Small plots of potatoes became popular in England where they were grown in gardens from the end of the seventeenth century. By 1680 a specialised potato market had been established in Wigan. Some other western areas of England, notably Cornwall, were also early adopters.

Slowly the Low Countries, France, Germany, and Russia also came to accept the potato. Resistance was finally overcome in the eighteenth century as growing European populations put pressure on the food supply and as the second 'Little Ice Age' increased need for food that would grow in cold climates. It turned out that potatoes are high yield, very nutritious, filling, with four times the calories of wheat, and can grow almost everywhere except the tropics.



Vincent van Gogh, *Potato Eaters*, 1885 (Rosenwald Collection. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington)

The potato was welcomed as a supplement to the working-class diet but did not challenge bread in as the staple food in Britain until cereal prices rose in the 1770s and 80s. Its popularity increased once farmers found it could be a profitable cash crop when grown on the edge of towns and when labourers began to cultivate it in their allotments. In the nineteenth century, large parts of Ireland and the Highlands and Islands of Scotland had become dependent on the potato crop. This proved disastrous when the crops were ruined by blight, as happened infamously in the middle of the nineteenth century.

References and Resources:

Information for this post was taken from the excellent David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 376.

R.N. Salaman, *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (1949)

Stuart Squires and Catherine Wilson (eds.), *Growing Better: Lincolnshire and the Potato* (2011)

W. Langer, 'American Foods and Europe's Population Growth 1750-1850', *Journal of Social History* 8: 2 (1975), 51-66.