

PLANET FOOD

February 2002

POTATOES

EDITORIAL – February 2002



If I was stranded on a desert island and had the choice of only one food, I would choose potatoes. The only problem with that scenario is that potatoes without any sort of fat might not be quite so appealing. The real joy of potatoes is their versatility and generally this requires butter or oil and some seasoning.

Roast potatoes come top of my list – when I was at school I somehow managed to get through 20 in one sitting. Now I am a little more restrained but still very keen. Other potato joys include mashed potato with celeriac, potato dauphinois and of course, baked potato with a variety of toppings (as long as it has not been re-heated in the microwave!).

A number of years ago I was lucky enough to go to Ecuador, en route to the Galapagos Islands. I can still conjure up the images of the Ecuadorian market stalls laid out with lots of different potato varieties. They were different colours, different shapes and different sizes – a visual treat.

POTATO DAY

Sunday 3rd February 2002 is the ninth national 'Potato Day' organised by HDRA (Henry Doubleday Research Association). The idea is to promote potato varieties – over 100 will be for sale on the day – and generally for people to share their passion for potatoes.

See: www.hdra.org.uk/news/potday2002.htm

POTATOES AND PESTICIDES

Stop sprouting!

'Potatoes and pesticides' is the title of Alan Wilson's talk on 'Potato Day'. Alan Wilson is the author of *The Story of the Potato*, as well as the Head Agronomist at Waitrose. I talked to him to find out about his concerns.

Alan Wilson says that his main area of concern is the chemicals used to suppress sprouts in potatoes and therefore stop them going soft. There are three main chemicals used for this:

- *tecnazene*, which was found to create hot spots on potatoes, which means that it was more concentrated in certain parts of the potato. This has meant that many farmers have switched to alternatives, although the manufacturer claims to have sorted the problem.
- *maleic hydrazide*, which is put on the crop when it is green. Alan does not like this chemical because using it effectively means that 100% of the crop has to be treated and therefore contains residues.
- *Chlorpropham (CIPC)*, which is Alan's preferred method. Growers are instructed not to use until it is necessary, which means that some 50% of potatoes sold can avoid residues, which is what Waitrose is aiming to do this year for some potato varieties.

Although the residues from these surpressants in potatoes are within statutory limits, Alan believes that it is important to minimise their use. He says there are three steps that can be taken to do this: 1. to choose varieties that are slow to sprout 2. To use CIPC only when needed and 3. to use refrigeration.

Organic potatoes will generally not be available between January and July because they do not use surpressants. They will generally be preserved through refrigeration.

Potato blight

Blight is the other big problem with potatoes. But Alan says that the main residue problems are not generally due to treatments for blight but for the surpressants.

The main way organic farmers deal with blight is through disease resistant varieties, which limits the varieties they tend to grow. Commercial organic farmers are still permitted to use copper sulphate but not for long it seems. Under EU legislation it has been agreed that the use of copper sulphate on organic crops will be reviewed in February 2002. Member states who have already banned its use want a total ban from then on. But a compromise solution is being proposed, which would reduce the amount of copper used to 8kg per year in 2002 and 6kg per year in 2003, after which its use would again be reviewed.

The concern with the use of copper is not because of residues – it is sprayed on potato leaves and when it is used directly on the produce it is easily washed off. The concerns are that it is synthetically produced and leaves residual heavy metals, potentially damaging soil flora and fauna. Where copper levels exceed certain limits, the **Soil Association** would de-register the land. This is likely to be more of a problem with viticulture, where the plants stay on the same ground, than with potatoes, which are grown in rotation.

Some farmers still use organophosphates to control pests on potatoes – in my view, this is a practice that should not be allowed <see Glossary>

SOMERSET ORGANICS

Potatoes are one of many vegetable crops grown by Peter Foster at Flaxdrayton Farm, Near South Petherton in Somerset

Peter Foster is at the heart of organics in Somerset. He works for the **Wessex Foundation at Magdalen Farm** (www.magdalencentre.co.uk), which is an educational charity, helping young people with special needs by introducing them to organic farming. He has started a 25 acre organic farm (**Flaxdrayton**), from which he runs an organic box scheme. And has recently set up **Somerset Organic Link** along with some other farmers, to help organic producers in Somerset, with marketing.

David Cooper has been working with Peter, at Flaxdrayton Farm, for 18 months. He left University, with a degree in agriculture and marketing, in 2000. He felt that the only future in agriculture was in organics and so managed to find a job at Flaxdrayton. I talked to David about the potatoes they grow.

There are 10 acres of potatoes at Flaxdrayton, chiefly the *Cara* variety because it is well known for blight resistance and one of the main varieties wholesalers want. It is a white potato with pink eyes and good for baking, boiling and mashing.

Copper sulphate is still used at Flaxdrayton but is unlikely to build up in the soil because they practice rotation. Generally after potatoes have been grown they plant brassicas (such as cabbages and brussel sprouts) on the same bit of land, then aliums (onions and garlic), then roots or salad, which includes parsnips, beetroot, lettuce etc. A key reason for this is that each crop attracts a different pest, so you keep rotating to stop one pest, such as eel worm in potatoes, becoming prevalent.

Flaxdrayton is Soil Association registered and has 30 acres of beef grassland. The produce is marketed through Somerset Organic Links to local pubs and restaurants, as well as sold through an organic box scheme and through farmers markets.

POTATO CONTACTS

FLAXDRAYTON FARM

01460 241 427

FRIENDS OF THE EARTH REAL FOOD CAMPAIGN 0207 490 1555

They have information on pesticide residues. www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/real_food

HDRA

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SOIL ASSOCIATION

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Alan Wilson is the Chief Agronomist at Waitrose and an expert on potatoes. He will be speaking at HDRA's Potato Day. www.waitrose.com