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A Weekly Column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

Week of March 23, 2015

For Immediate Release

Irish Potatoes?

Pat Kusters, Iowa Master Gardener

March had me thinking about Ireland - St. Patrick's Day, my Irish heritage, the Irish potato famine, Irish potatoes. A year ago if someone had asked me if potatoes were native to Ireland, I might have given the trite reply, "duh." After all, my mother's grandparents left Ireland after the infamous potato famine when blight wiped out their potato mono-culture during the 19th Century. And travel around Ireland only reinforced my assumption since potatoes were served in one form or another at nearly every meal as I sampled the local cuisine.

Then last year, traveling the high Andes Mountains of South America, to my surprise I discovered the potato is native to Peru. It turns out the indigenous Inca people and their pre-historic ancestors had learned to cultivate and preserve the potato as a diet staple thousands of years before the Spanish arrived in the 1400's. Sailors returning to Spain from the Andes are said to have brought potatoes for their own consumption and carried the leftovers ashore for planting. Legend also says that Spanish Armada ships were carrying potatoes when wrecked off the Irish coast in 1588, and some of them washed ashore.

The potato arrived in North America as early as 1621 but did not become a cultivated food source until Scotch-Irish immigrants brought them to New Hampshire around 1720. Idaho, the present day largest producer of potatoes, actually did not begin growing them until the 1830's when missionaries moved west and tried to teach Native Americans to grow crops.



First shunned by European and American upper classes, the lowly potato gradually became a staple crop to feed peasants and laborers because it was a cheap source of calories with superior nutrition. In fact, during the Alaskan Klondike gold rush in the 1890's, potatoes were practically worth their weight in gold because of their vitamin C content. Gold at that time was more plentiful than nutritious foods. Thus, throughout Europe, America – and Ireland – the potato became the most important new food of the 19th Century and today is the 4th most important crop in the world after wheat, rice and corn.

Potato trivia abounds. Enjoy these bits and pieces of fact and fiction.

- An expectant mother shouldn't eat potatoes or her baby will be born with a big head.
- Laying potato peelings at a girl's door on May Day shows dislike for her.
- Rubbing a wart with potato peels and burying them will make your wart disappear.

Some ancient uses for potatoes other than dinner:

- Place raw slices on broken bones to promote healing.
- Carry in your pocket to prevent rheumatism or toothache.
- Clear facial blemishes by washing with cool potato juice.
- Treat sunburn by rubbing the area with raw potato.

And finally, according to some, it's not necessary to 'bless' the food they are about to eat if potatoes are not served. Personally, I like this old Pennsylvania prayer:

"Potatoes served at breakfast, At dinner served again; Potatoes served at supper, Forever and Amen!"