



Homegrown Horticulture

TIPS FOR SUCCESS IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

Potato Scab

Common Scab of Potato is a disease that most growers of potatoes will experience to some degree at some point. It is caused by a fungus-like bacterium that can live in the soil for many years. While we most often see it on potatoes, it can also affect other root vegetables (e.g., beets, carrots, etc.), sometimes.

Scab is aptly named, causing small, round, brown, scab-like lesions on the surface of the tubers. They are typically less than 1 cm across, but there can be lots of them. The lesions can vary in how they look, ranging from shallow and superficial to deep and pitted. This disease occurs entirely in the soil and doesn't spread in storage.

How severe the scab symptoms are will depend on a number of factors, including the strain of the pathogen itself, the susceptibility of the potato cultivar, and several soil conditions, such as organic matter content, soil pH (acidity/alkalinity) and soil moisture content.

If you don't have scab, be careful to not introduce it to your soil on infected seed (use clean seed) or by adding manure from animals fed scabby potatoes. Also try and give your soils a break from potatoes year after year. Move things around as much as you can.

Choosing a less susceptible potato cultivar is a good management strategy. There are more cultivars available now that are less prone to get scab, or that might reduce the severity of scab if it is already present in the soil.

Do as much as you can to keep the moisture content of the soil even, avoiding ups and downs, especially avoiding dry conditions as tubers are starting to form under the plant. This is the time when they are most likely to become infected. This is usually about 4-6 weeks after planting and is usually signaled by the plant starting to flower.

Having soils that hold moisture well, such as those that have a good amount of organic matter, can help to even out the moisture in the soil, and avoid the drying out. Don't apply lots of organic matter in the season but add it in the fall.

Some people suggest that changing your soil pH to make it less pleasant for the scab pathogen to thrive will help, but it is difficult to do and will also affect the growth of the potatoes. Focus on keeping them watered evenly instead.

