

THE GREAT LONDON SPUD EXPERIMENT

by Frank Green

A case study in the gap between agronomic theory and practice

As Fall comes around again with its shorter days and rich harvests in Southwestern Ontario, I can't help thinking back to last Thanksgiving weekend and the sad results of my spud-in-a-barrel experiment.

Everyone knows the proximity of the potato to the heart of every Irish man and woman. History, culture, myth, and, it seems, even genetic makeup have bonded the Celtic soul to this beautiful, nourishing tuber. This is certainly so in the Ottawa Valley where I grew up.

What then had been my joy to discover, eight years ago when I planted the first garden in my new back yard, that I was blessed with the rich sandy loam that is perfect for growing spuds? Each year from then on I extended the size of the garden and the variety of species - Kennebec, Red Chieftain, Irish Cobbler of course, Superior, Green Mountain, Yukon Gold and even a few exotics like German Fingerling.

It didn't matter what the species, every kind of spud flourished in the tuberous El Dorado of my back yard and they were all delicious.

Of course, I had plenty of advice from friends and acquaintances over at the Hall, the neighbourhood pub. One habitué, Sam, a truck driver with Prince Edward Island credentials as a potato expert, advised, "Plant a row

of onions beside each row of spuds. The onions will make the eyes of the potatoes cry and you can cut your water bill way back."

Tom, a big Irishman from New Brunswick, qualified both as a grower with years of farm experience and as a dedicated consumer with the true connoisseur's talent of being able to identify, by taste alone, the exact species, region of origin, soil and weather conditions prevalent during the growing season of any given plate of mashed potatoes.

"Sebago, Holland Marsh, acidic, wet summer;" or "Blue, Indian River, P.E.I., dry as a popcorn fart!" and so on.

Perhaps I should have been content to grow my spuds in the conventional way that had worked so well for me. But over the winter of 96-97 I was seduced by the idea of growing potatoes in a barrel.

The theory was simple enough. Plant 3 or 4 seed potatoes as usual within a 2-3-foot diameter. Place a barrel (open-ended top and bottom) over the plants. When the plants start to grow, keep adding soil around them gradually, until, a month or so later, the plants and the soil reach the top of the barrel.

In theory, you will get potatoes growing all the way up the barrel, maybe a hundred pounds of spuds. The savings - in space and in time weeding and hilling, etc., would be fantastic!

I had read about this method some years earlier and had even tried it twice - once in an old laundry basket lined with garbage bags and once in a thick old wooden Labatt's draft beer keg. Both attempts had enjoyed limited success, but I thought I had identified the reasons for the poor production: too short a growing time with the laundry basket and poor air circulation with the Labatt's keg.

But now, with my perfect potato-growing soil, a planned early start and, instead of a barrel, a black, square, plastic back-yard composter with plenty of air vents - if success was not guaranteed, at least the potential seemed enormous.

By May 1, 1997 all was ready for the grand experiment. After the garden had been expertly roto-tilled by my Italian friend's son, I planted two Red Chieftains and two Kennebecs (always my two best producers) in the four corners of the composter which itself was in a corner of the garden. My 20-year old daughter Hope hung a professional looking sign on the side of the composter which proclaimed:

High-Tech  
Experimental  
Potato Growing  
Facility.

About ten days later the little plants broke ground and progressed rapidly. About another week later, I added soil carefully around the leaves. By mid-June the soil was up to the top of the composter and the plants were covered with glorious white and purple blossoms.

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Loving care was generously supplied all summer. If rain was lacking, the hose was applied. Impertinent weeds were removed instantaneously. Hope spoke words of warm encouragement to the healthy plants.

Naturally, the experiment attracted occasional unannounced inspection tours and considerable interest at the Hall. "Hey Frank, did you remember to water the barrel?" asked Newfy Jack. "Be careful now, don't drown the suckers!" countered P.E.I. Sam. Bets were made on the expected yield. In a moment of hubris I foolishly predicted what I thought to be a modest 50-pound crop from the barrel.

"If you can't handle it, I can always get a truck in here from McCain's to take the overflow," said Tom in his generous, down-home way.

"Do you think you'll be hiring extra help in the Fall?" inquired Sam.

Finally, more than four months after the start of the experiment, Thanksgiving weekend arrived, the agreed upon date for tipping the barrel, the end of the experiment ...the moment of truth.

A small but keenly interested cast of characters joined my daughter and me in our back yard at 9:00 Saturday morning: Tom the connoisseur, my Italian friend Bob and his son, roto-tilling Robert, Ken and Barbie from down the way, who were generally known as the Mayor and First Lady of the street. (A true Irishwoman, Barbie loves "Murphies" as she called spuds, but the heathen Ken claims to have "no use for those damn roots.")

Ken, perhaps in his wily way sensing what was to ensue, had brought his camera to record the event for posterity. I took out the wheelbarrow so that the harvested potatoes could be captured for weighing, in case the Guinness Book of Records showed interest.

"Frank, you look as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs," commented Tom astutely.

After a few preliminary photos, Tom put his shoulder to the composter and tilted it. First slowly and carefully and then somewhat more desperately, I used the hoe to spread out the fluffy fine soil in search of potatoes. It was not a highly rewarding search. The final count, in all that beautiful soil, was eleven decent-sized potatoes, seven marbles, and one gargoyle of a German Fingerling which had somehow gotten into the barrel.

Ken gleefully snapped pictures of the pathetic looking lot of them in the wheelbarrow.

Generally the crowd was somewhat sympathetic and refrained from obvious jibes as we sipped on what was supposed to be the celebratory bottle of wine.

Even so, I couldn't help but hear a bit of snickering from the sidelines and I had no difficulty imagining what the comments would be later at the Hall.

Tom had the last word before leaving, "Does this mean I won't have to call McCain's for the truck?"