

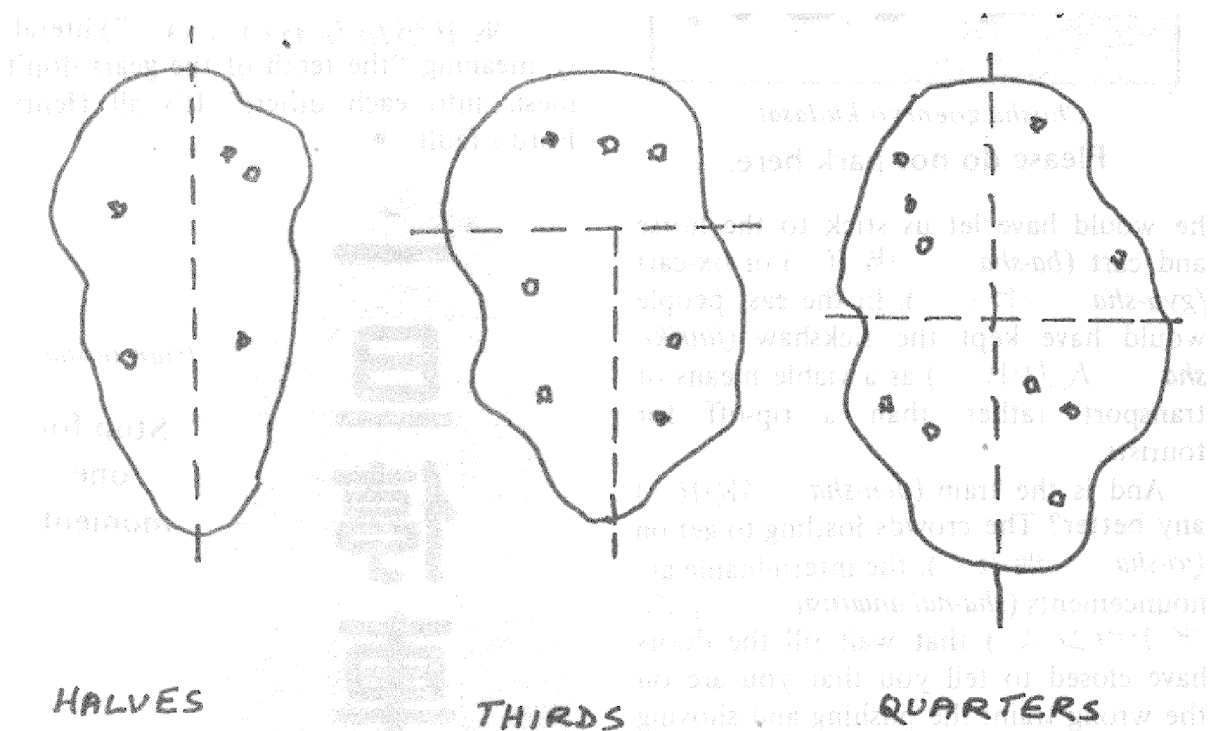
Ponies and Potatoes

I found a pony the other day, in a car park. Extraordinary place for one to be. It was not one of those jolly, rotund Thelwellian ponies I rode as a child but a dejected manure-caked equine waif. The shack where it was interned would disgrace even a bicycle. Not a wisp of straw only an uninviting slimy asphalt floor. Who or why would anyone keep a pony in this way? I stopped to find out. The answer lay across the road in a plush *ryokan* full of bowing factotum, one of the many that dot the hot-spring resort of Yu no Hana on the Nose side of Kameoka. The *ryokan*'s name, in case you wish to avoid it, is Sumiya. Anyway, the net result was that ten minutes later, I found myself minus my car on a 3-hour trek back to Nose with a miniature piebald equine in tow, both of us walking as fast as our hooves could carry us, in case they changed their minds. After a few days of sleeping on a deep straw bed and indulging in horsey delights like bamboo grass (*sasa*) and carrots she'd all but forgotten the car-park nightmare and become one of the family.

A friend of mine said no way was it possible to tie in the above story with gardening. Well here goes. The coming of the pony is good news for my next gardening venture. I ordered some mushroom spawn from England because I was tired of being robbed every time I bought a miserly pack of tasteless button mushrooms at one of the up-market supers and wanted to see if I could grow them myself. The golden secret of successful mushroom growing is strawy horse manure. With such an unexpected pony bonus I'm going to give it a try and will, succeed or fail, write about it in due course.

Potatoes too develop a wonderful flavour with horse manure. If you ordered your seed potatoes last month you probably found there were

only two kinds on offer – May Queen, a longish waxy potato and Danshaku, a round Japanese variety. I usually order both as the taste is more influenced by the manure than the variety. Having dug (hopefully) lots of compost into your soil already, you should prepare 60cm wide rows. Expose the rows, forking lots more compost or manure into the bottom of the trench. No lime is needed for potatoes. Add a little soil and place the tubers at about 50cm intervals on top. If they are about the size of a hen's egg you can lay them uncut, however any that are large or have lots of 'eyes' (shoots), need cutting. The number and spacing of the 'eyes' determine the way you divide the potato (see diagram).



We coat our cut section in ash before planting but this is optional. Ridge about 5cm of soil over the potatoes. When the shoots emerge 3-4 weeks later you'll have to ridge again. This ridging, or earthing-up should go on continuously as the plants grow. It prevents the tubers from being

exposed to sunlight and therefore becoming green and inedible, as well as allowing rain to drain off rapidly. For those living in warmer climes like Osaka or Kobe, potatoes can go in in early March. Nose people mindful of late frosts usually plant around *Higan* (18th - 24th).

After the shoots are well up decide which is the strongest shoot on each plant and remove all others. This ensures you get a fair number of big potatoes rather than a heap of miniature ones. Usually the potatoes can be dug up once the flowers and leaves have withered or yellowed but I can never resist rummaging by hand under the soil to steal early ones. The bulk of the crop should be dug up before the onset of the rainy season. Choose a fine day and dig them out carefully, letting them dry on the surface before storing them somewhere dark and dry.

Since carrot consumption in my household is now likely to rise tenfold, I'm going to have to increase production. As every horse knows, carrots are not only delicious but hold top place as suppliers of Vitamin A among vegetables. Fortunately March is an ideal time for planting. Although carrots are common enough I've personally found them quite hard to grow. They thrive best in a light well-drained soil, preferably manured from the previous crop. If the manure hasn't rotted enough, the carrots produce forked hairy roots. After having little success with the ordinary long types, I tried a quicker-maturing short variety. These proved such an instant success and so much easier to grow that I've given up trying the other type. There are various numbers of short varieties as well as mini-carrots (*mini-ninjin*) but if in doubt compare the pictures on the seed packages and you can easily see which are the shorter and stumpier.

If possible sow your carrot seeds near or between rows of onions. They are excellent companion vegetables as each deters the other's pests. Lime the soil 10 days before planting (roughly 100g./sq. metre). The seeds germinate slowly so cover them thinly with straw and water frequently if the soil shows signs of drying out. The plants should be

thinned and these tender thinnings, leaves, roots and all are delicious as *tempura*, chopped raw in salads or par-boiled and tossed in your favourite dressing. Carrot leaves are every bit as nutritious as the roots but tough when mature. But before you condemn them to the dustbin or compost heap, keep in mind hungry equine friends.

Other things to plant in March are lettuce, red radish and thin spring onions (*wakegi*), all suitable for balcony boxes, while spinach can be sown directly in the open. The Spring Equinox (*Shunbun*) signals the start of outdoor activities. Gardeners emerge from hibernation, plants that looked dead suddenly burst into life. The weeds are returning in full force to plague my garden but in spite of them I'm glad to see the back of winter.

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