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NORTHERN IRELAND

Potatoes in Northern Ireland: briefing, November 2026

21 November 2026 · Food life-cycle series · Draft, not for circulation without Robert's say-so. General information, not legal or financial advice.

Summary

> On 20 November 2026 the UK and EU concluded negotiations on a sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement. If it applies from its target date of 1 March 2028, GB seed potatoes can be sold into the EU again, a market NI has supplied as the only UK source since 1 January 2021. The potato is a small crop in NI but a low-carbon staple with a valuable seed trade; its real costs are soil, nitrogen and waste.

1. **The seed market is changing.** The government says GB seed potato exports to the EU will resume under the SPS agreement. NI seed growers face new competition there, but many also buy Scottish basic seed, so an easier GB route helps them too.
2. **A small, steady crop.** NI grew 3,187 hectares of potatoes in June 2025, up 3% on 2024, out of about 1 million hectares farmed (DAERA).
3. **Low carbon, high soil cost.** About 0.09 kg CO2e per kilo at the farm gate in Scottish data, far below meat. But potato growing compacts soil, carries it off at harvest and leaves nitrate behind.
4. **The most wasted food.** Potatoes top UK household food waste, much of it as peel. The skin holds fibre and potassium, and is worth eating when the potato is sound, not green or sprouting.
5. **Not one of your 5 A Day.** The NHS counts potatoes as a starchy food, a good source of energy, fibre, B vitamins and potassium.

Key figures

Measure	Figure	Period	Source
Potato area, NI	3,187 ha (up 3%)	June 2025	DAERA/NISRA census, 11 Dec 2025
Potato area, NI, a year earlier	3,096 ha (down 5%)	June 2024	DAERA/NISRA census 2024
Total crop area, NI	about 46,578 ha	June 2025	DAERA
Potato area, Ireland	about 9,000 ha; 382,000 t	2019	Griffin et al., IJAFR 2022
Rooster's share of Irish plantings	about 58%	2019	Griffin et al., as above
Comber Earlies	PGI registered	20 Feb 2012	Reg (EU) No 148/2012

Measure	Figure	Period	Source
Farm-gate footprint, ware potatoes	about 90 kg CO2e/t (60–120)	Scottish data, 2024	FAS KTIF report
Share of EU harvest soil loss from potatoes	about 35% of 14.7 Mt a year	2000–2016	JRC ESDAC, Panagos et al. 2019
Last legal UK use of CIPC sprout suppressant	8 October 2020	UK	AHDB
Avoidable household potato waste	359,000 t a year	UK, 2007 study	WRAP, The Food We Waste (2008)

The waste figure is old; WRAP's latest potato figures need pulling directly. The carbon figure is Scottish; no published NI potato footprint was found.

The UK–EU deal and NI seed

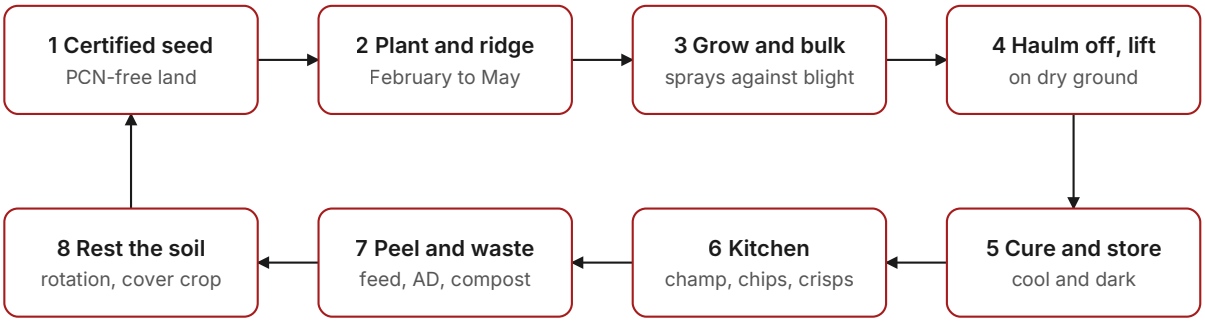
At the second UK–EU summit on 20 November 2026, the UK and EU concluded negotiations on an SPS agreement (Cabinet Office, UK/EU Summit 2026 key documents). The text is not published. It is intended to apply from 1 March 2028, subject to signature, ratification and legislation (GOV.UK, SPS agreement: preparing your business, updated 20 November 2026). The government's horticulture guidance says seed potato exports will resume and GB-listed varieties will be added to the EU Common Catalogue; that page, last updated 30 July 2026, still gives a mid-2027 start (GOV.UK, horticulture).

Issue	Now (21 Nov 2026)	After the SPS agreement (target 1 Mar 2028)	What it means for NI potatoes (analysis)
NI seed to ROI and EU	Moves under EU plant health rules (Windsor Framework)	Unchanged	No change to NI's access
GB seed to EU	Barred since 1 January 2021	Exports resume (GOV.UK)	GB seed competes with NI seed in EU markets
GB seed into NI	Allowed since 1 October 2023 under the NI Plant Health Label scheme: registered operators, pre-notified on TRACES NT, not to be moved on to the EU, including ROI (DAERA)	Not yet set out	An easier route would help NI growers who buy Scottish basic seed; check the final text
Plants and plant products, EU to GB	Import checks	Checks stop; some post-import checks remain (GOV.UK)	Cheaper EU inputs for GB growers
Pesticides and residue limits	NI follows EU law; GB sets its own	GB aligns with EU rules (GOV.UK)	NI–GB gap narrows; GB growers may lose some active substances
Variety listing	Separate GB and EU lists	GB-listed varieties added to the EU Common Catalogue (GOV.UK)	A wider market for varieties listed in GB

The last column is the author's analysis, not government guidance. Timings assume the 1 March 2028 target holds.

The life cycle

From certified seed to peel and back to the soil



A potato crop starts from a seed tuber, not true seed, so every field depends on the health of the seed before it. Most of the crop's carbon is spent in stages 2 to 5; most of its soil damage happens at stage 4; and most of its waste happens at stages 6 and 7, in kitchens and processing plants.

What has changed

The crop

NI's potato area fell 5% to 3,096 ha in 2024, then rose 3% to 3,187 ha in 2025 (DAERA). Ware and seed are grown mainly in the drier east and north: north Down and the Ards, and the Coleraine, Limavady and north Antrim belt *(county split to confirm from DAERA data)*. Comber Earlies, lifted between early May and late July around Comber, are NI's protected potato name, now on the UK geographical indication register.

Varieties

One Irish-bred variety dominates the island: Rooster, released in 1991 from the Teagasc programme at Oak Park, Carlow, now about 58% of Irish plantings. Teagasc's commercial partner, IPM Potato Group, became part of the Dutch firm HZPC in February 2026 (trade press). Older varieties persist for flavour and export: Kerr's Pink, Golden Wonder, British Queen, King Edward. NI's breeding station at Loughgall produced Carlingford (1982), Dundrod and, under AFBI, the purple-fleshed Purple Magic *(whether AFBI still breeds potatoes is to confirm)*.

Seed trade

Since 1 January 2021 GB seed potatoes have been barred from the EU, while NI seed, under EU plant health rules, has kept access, in competition with Dutch and other EU seed. Since 1 October 2023 certified GB seed can move into NI under the NI Plant Health Label scheme, for planting in NI only; it must not be moved on to the EU, including ROI (DAERA). In 2015 King Edward and Kerr's Pink made up most NI seed sent to the Canary Islands, a market with rules strict enough that NI was among only three origins able to supply it (AFBI, 2015).

Storage chemistry

The EU did not renew approval of the sprout suppressant chlorpropham (CIPC) in 2019; authorisations had to be withdrawn by 8 January 2020, and final UK use was 8 October 2020 (AHDB). Residues linger in old stores, so residue limits still matter. AHDB reported an EU temporary limit of 0.4 mg/kg from September 2021, while the GB limit stayed at 10 mg/kg and

HSE proposed lowering it in 2023 *(current limits to confirm)*. Under the SPS agreement GB moves to EU limits. Since 2023 the FSA has said raw potatoes can be kept in the home fridge without materially raising acrylamide, which helps cut waste.

Blight

Late blight remains a major disease and cost for growers. The aggressive 37A2 strain was widely established in NI by 2019, so the fungicide fluazinam can no longer be relied on (DAERA, May 2020). In GB the EU46 strain made up about a quarter of samples in 2025; separately, more than half of all UK outbreaks sampled that year were on volunteer potatoes (James Hutton Institute). Growers time sprays from Hutton Criteria warnings, and since the desiccant diquat was withdrawn, haulm destruction relies more on flailing and other products.

Waste

Potatoes have been the most-wasted single food in UK homes since WRAP's first study, and peel is a large part of it. Industrial peeling removes 15–40% of the potato, depending on the method.

Land, soil, carbon and the whole crop

- **Soil.** Heavy harvesters on wet ground compact soil. A UK survey of 602 potato fields (1992–2004) found two-thirds had layers dense enough (3 MPa or more) to nearly stop root growth (Stalham et al. 2007); NI's wet gleys are at particular risk. AHDB trials found that destoning deeper than needed lowered yield, while shallower destoning did no harm and saved fuel.
- **Soil leaving the farm.** Root crops carry soil away on the tubers. Across the EU about 14.7 million tonnes a year is lost this way, roughly 35% of it on potatoes (JRC ESDAC, Panagos et al. 2019).
- **Nitrogen.** Fertiliser makes nitrous oxide, and bare ridges after harvest leak nitrate over winter. DAERA consulted on a Nutrients Action Programme for 2027–2030 from 29 June to 7 September 2026; the outcome was not published at 21 November 2026.
- **Carbon.** About 0.09 kg CO2e per kilo at farm gate in Scottish data, with fertiliser about two-thirds of the footprint and energy a third, fuel 22% and electricity 11% (FAS, April 2024). For NI stores a UK grid factor is a poor fit; an all-island Single Electricity Market factor is more accurate.
- **Peat and conacre.** Cultivating peat releases stored carbon. Conacre gives growers the clean, rotated ground potatoes need, but 11-month lets reward no one for protecting soil structure; longer lets with soil conditions are worth testing.
- **Peel and by-products.** Processing peel and wash water go mostly to animal feed, and can go to anaerobic digestion, starch recovery and, at research stage, bio-based packaging.
- **Spirits.** Poitín may be made from potatoes. In Ireland it was illegal to make from 1661 until 1997; it now has an all-island geographical indication, minimum 40% abv. In the UK, including NI, producing spirits without HMRC approval is unlawful (Finance (No. 2) Act 2023, s.82, from 1 February 2025). NI producers include Echlinville (Bán Poitín) and Hughes Craft Distillery (potato vodka).

Markets

Potato prices in 2026 are low across the UK and northern Europe after a surplus, and most ware potatoes are sold on contract rather than on the open market.

- **Prices.** In February 2026 the top of the GB free-buy market for Maris Piper was about £180 a tonne, against about £400 a year earlier; 2026/27 contract prices also moved lower (GB Potatoes, reported by FreshPlaza, 9 Feb 2026). European futures fell to about £20 a tonne for the April 2026 contract (Farmers Weekly, 23 Apr 2026). These are trade-press figures; no official NI potato price series was found. NI ware prices follow the all-island and GB markets.
- **Area.** One scenario modelled by GB Potatoes put the 2026 UK area 5–10% lower, at just under 100,000 ha. NI's area rose 3% in 2025; the June 2026 NI census is due in December 2026.
- **Supply.** At about 3,200 ha, NI is likely a net importer of ware potatoes, mainly from GB and ROI *(tonnes, yield and self-sufficiency to confirm from DAERA's Statistical Review)*.
- **Where NI potatoes go.** Fresh packing for NI and Irish retail; crisps and processed products, from firms such as Tayto (Tandragee) and Mash Direct (near Comber); and seed for export.
- **Breeding ownership.** HZPC completed its acquisition of IPM Potato Group, Teagasc's commercial partner for Rooster, in February 2026 (trade press).
- **Ireland.** Rooster takes about 62% of household purchases (Griffin et al. 2022, citing Kantar). ROI is both the main competitor and a main outlet for NI ware.

Nutrition

Potatoes are a good source of energy, fibre, B vitamins and potassium, but the NHS does not count them in your 5 A Day, because they are eaten as the starchy part of a meal, in place of bread, rice or pasta (NHS).

Per 100 g	Energy	Carbohydrate	Fibre	Vitamin C	Potassium	Vitamin A
Old potato, raw flesh	82 kcal	20 g	2.0 g	14 mg	443 mg	trace
Old potato, boiled, flesh only	74 kcal	18 g	1.6 g	9 mg	365 mg	trace
Old potato, baked, flesh and skin	97 kcal	23 g	2.6 g	6 mg	600 mg	trace
New potato, boiled in skin	68 kcal	15 g	1.8 g	7 mg	377 mg	0

UK Composition of Foods Integrated Dataset 2021 (McCance and Widdowson), as published by patient.info (to confirm against the CoFID file itself).

- **Skin matters.** Baked flesh and skin carries more fibre and potassium per 100 g than boiled flesh alone; the NHS advises leaving skins on, for potatoes that are sound and not green or sprouting.
- **Boiling leaches.** Vitamin C, B vitamins and potassium pass into cooking water; steaming or boiling in skins keeps more in.
- **Vitamin A.** The dataset lists none or a trace. Orange sweet potato is the vitamin A root, and the NHS does count sweet potato in 5 A Day.

Health

- **Acrylamide.** Frying, roasting and baking at high temperature form acrylamide. FSA advice: "go for gold", cooking to golden, not dark brown. Storing raw potatoes in the home fridge is fine (FSA, 2023).
- **Green potatoes and sprouts.** Light raises glycoalkaloids (solanine and chaconine), which concentrate in and just under the skin and are toxic in quantity. Cut away green parts and sprouts; throw away very green potatoes. Never eat potato berries or leaves.
- **Fat and salt.** The potato itself is almost fat-free and salt-free; chips, crisps and butter change that. The NHS advises eating potatoes without added salt or fat where possible.
- **Blood sugar.** Potatoes, especially mashed, raise blood sugar quickly; eating them with protein and vegetables slows this.
- **Potassium and kidney disease.** People told to limit potassium should follow their kidney dietitian. Advice usually means peeling, cutting into small pieces and boiling in plenty of water that is then thrown away, and avoiding steaming, microwaving, air-frying and jacket potatoes (Kidney Care UK; North Bristol NHS Trust). This is the opposite of the general "skins on" advice, and it takes priority for those patients.

Recipes of Irish origin

Most traditional Irish potato dishes began as ways to stretch a few ingredients or use up leftovers. Floury varieties such as Rooster, Kerr's Pink and Queens suit nearly all of them.

Dish	What it is	Where and when
Champ	Mash beaten with scallions scalded in milk, served with a well of melted butter	Ulster staple
Poundies	Close relative of champ, mash pounded with scallions or chives	South and west *(regional use to confirm)*
Colcannon	Mash with kale or cabbage, butter and milk	All-island; Halloween, with a ring or coin hidden in it
Boxty	Grated raw potato squeezed dry, mixed with mash and flour; griddled, boiled or baked	North Connacht and south Ulster (Leitrim, Cavan, Fermanagh)
Potato bread (fadge, tattie bread)	Mash, flour, butter and salt rolled thin and cut into farls, cooked on a dry griddle	Ulster; part of the Ulster fry
Potato apple cake	Potato bread dough wrapped round sliced Bramley apple, sugar and butter	Co Armagh; Halloween
Stampy	Grated raw potato cake with sugar, sometimes cream and caraway	Halloween in parts of Leitrim, Cavan and the midlands *(to confirm)*
Pandy	Plain mash with butter and milk, for children and the sick	All-island
Irish stew	Mutton or lamb, onions and potatoes; floury potatoes thicken it	All-island; Ulster versions often add carrot
Dublin coddle	Sausages, bacon, onion and potatoes simmered slowly	Dublin
Bacon, cabbage and spuds	Boiled bacon or ham, cabbage and potatoes in their jackets	All-island Sunday dinner

Growing potatoes at home

Potatoes are one of the easiest crops for a garden, allotment or large container, and earlies are ready by midsummer.

1. **Buy certified seed potatoes,** not supermarket potatoes, which can carry virus and disease. DAERA sets the rules for seed sold to gardeners in NI (DAERA, Retail sales of seed potatoes).
2. **Choose varieties** with an RHS Award of Garden Merit; blight-resistant Sarpo varieties suit wet NI summers (RHS).
3. **Chit earlies** in egg boxes somewhere cool and bright, from late January in milder areas to early March in colder ones; it takes four to six weeks. There is no real advantage in chitting maincrop.
4. **Plant** earlies 30–38 cm apart, rows 38–50 cm apart, or 50–60 cm to make earthing up easier.
5. **Earth up** soil or compost round the stems as they grow, to protect young growth from frost and stop tubers turning green.
6. **Containers:** a large container or a sack with drainage holes, half-full at planting, topped up with compost as the stems grow.
7. **Watch for blight.** If blight appears, cut off the foliage at once, wait two weeks for spores to die, then lift the potatoes (RHS).
8. **Rotate** potatoes and tomatoes each year, and pull up any volunteer potatoes next spring.

Composting potato waste

- **Peelings and leftovers.** Raw peel composts well at home. Cooked potato and leftovers are better in the council food-waste caddy, as they attract rats in an open heap. Every NI council must provide households with a food-waste container, under the Food Waste Regulations (NI) 2015, from 1 April 2017 (nidirect).
- **Sprouting peel.** Pieces with eyes can sprout in a cool heap; bury peel in the middle or turn the heap.
- **Blighted tubers.** Don't put blighted potatoes on a home heap: most domestic heaps are not warm enough to kill the disease, and dumped tubers are a main source of next year's blight (Garden Organic). Use the general or food-waste collection.
- **Blighted foliage.** Lightly affected leaves are best in household waste; stems cut above ground can be composted if no tubers are attached. Destroy any volunteers that sprout from the heap.
- **Businesses.** Since 1 April 2017 food businesses producing more than 5 kg of food waste a week must separate it for collection (Food Waste Regulations (NI) 2015). Larger volumes of peel and wash water suit anaerobic digestion or animal feed.

Six openings and the risks

Openings

1. **Sell NI seed before GB returns.** If the March 2028 target holds, NI has about 15 months before GB seed can compete in the EU again. Use it to lock in buyers on health status and established varieties.

2. **Peel to feed and energy.** Map NI processors' peel and wash-water streams against animal feed outlets and anaerobic digestion capacity, as part of the biomethane strategy (DfE/DAERA consultation open to 15 December 2026).
3. **Soil-first growing.** Shallow destoning, lifting on dry ground, cover crops after harvest, and conacre lets with soil conditions.
4. **A measured Comber Earlies footprint.** A farm-gate figure would let the PGI growers answer retailer carbon questions with NI data rather than GB averages.
5. **Heritage and the Lumper.** The Famine potato, revived by a Glens of Antrim grower, for schools, tourism and a seed bank.
6. **Legal poitín from NI potatoes.** A rural distilling niche under the all-island geographical indication, with HMRC approval.

Risks

- GB seed re-enters the EU, if the March 2028 target holds, and erodes NI's niche.
- New blight strains outrun fungicides, while EU-aligned rules could remove more active substances.
- Compaction and erosion worsen with heavier machinery and wetter autumns; lifting windows shrink.
- Tighter nutrient rules under the next NAP add cost for growers.
- Low 2026 prices squeeze growers on free-buy markets, and labour and store energy costs stay high.

What to ask for

Of DAERA

- Publish an NI seed potato market assessment before GB seed returns to the EU, with certified areas by variety and grade.
- Say how post-harvest bare ground and cover crops will be supported under the Sustainable Agriculture Programme and soil schemes.
- Commission AFBI to measure an NI potato carbon footprint, using NI electricity factors for stores.
- Confirm the future of potato breeding and variety testing at AFBI Loughgall.

Of growers, packers and processors

- Report peel and wash-water volumes so the by-product can be matched to feed and anaerobic digestion outlets.
- Back a Comber Earlies footprint as a pilot for NI food names.
- Adopt dry-lift and shallow-destoning practice, and record soil carried off at harvest.

Of councils and the public sector

- Carry a "store in the fridge, eat the skin unless it is green or sprouting" message in food-waste campaigns, using the FSA's 2023 advice.
- Specify fresh, seasonal and named-variety potatoes in school and hospital catering, within procurement rules.

Sources and caveats

- **Official and primary:** DAERA/NISRA June Agricultural Census 2024 and 2025; DAERA seed potato pages and NIPHL scheme page; DAERA blight guidance (May 2020); DAERA NAP 2027–2030 consultation; Seed Potatoes Regulations (NI) 2016; Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) No 148/2012 and UK GI register; AFBI releases; Teagasc and Griffin et al., IJAFR 2022; AHDB on CIPC and destoning; FSA acrylamide guidance; NHS 5 A Day and starchy foods; Kidney Care UK and North Bristol NHS Trust on potassium; FAS Scotland KTIF potato report (April 2024); GOV.UK SPS agreement guidance (updated 20 Nov 2026) and horticulture page (30 Jul 2026); Cabinet Office UK/EU Summit 2026 key documents; Irish Poteen technical file (2019); Finance (No. 2) Act 2023; Food Waste Regulations (NI) 2015; nidirect; RHS.
- **Research:** Panagos et al. 2019 (JRC ESDAC); Stalham et al. 2007; peel valorisation reviews (2022, 2024); WRAP, The Food We Waste (2008).
- **Press and secondary:** GB Potatoes via FreshPlaza (Feb 2026 prices); Farmers Weekly (European futures); James Hutton Institute (EU46); trade press on HZPC and IPM and on NI spirits; patient.info (CoFID values); Garden Organic.
- **Still to confirm:** NI tonnes, yield and self-sufficiency; county split of NI potato area; AFBI breeding status; current CIPC limits; nutrition values against the CoFID file; WRAP's latest potato waste figures; the final SPS text; peeling losses (15–40%); share of potato land on conacre.

Items marked to confirm in the text, and those listed above, are not yet checked against a primary source.

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Draft briefing, 21 November 2026. General information, not legal, tax or financial advice. Not for circulation without Robert J. Park's say-so.