“The potato is on the frontline in the fight against world hunger and poverty.”

Jacques Diouf
Director-General, FAO
The International Year

The IYP mission: to raise awareness of the importance of the potato – and that of agriculture in general – in addressing issues of global concern, including hunger, poverty and threats to the environment.
Why potato?

“A United Nations international year once actually meant something. But what to make of the International Year of the Potato?”

So began a scathing editorial in a Canadian online daily, which joked that IYP might result in a “Declaration of the rights of potatoes and other starchy edible tubulars”. The editorialist revealed a lack of familiarity not only with botany – the potato is a tuber, not a “tubular” – but, above all, with the potato’s place in agriculture, the economy and world food security.

The potato is already an integral part of the global food system. It is the world’s number one non-grain food commodity, with production reaching a record 325 million tonnes in 2007. Potato consumption is expanding strongly in developing countries, which now account for more than half of the global harvest and where the potato’s ease of cultivation and high energy content have made it a valuable cash crop for millions of farmers.

At the same time, the potato — unlike major cereals — is not a globally traded commodity. Only a fraction of total production enters foreign trade, and potato prices are determined usually by local production costs, not by the vagaries of international markets. It is, therefore, a highly recommended food security crop that can help low-income farmers and vulnerable consumers ride out the turmoil in world food supply and demand.

In Peru, for example, the government has acted to reduce costly wheat imports by encouraging people to eat bread that includes potato flour. In China, the world’s biggest potato producer, agriculture experts have proposed that potatoes become the major food crop on much of the country’s arable land. India has plans to double its potato production.

Food of the future. The International Year of the Potato has raised awareness of the potato’s fundamental importance as a staple food of humanity. But it also had a very practical aim: to promote development of sustainable potato-based systems that enhance the well-being of producers and consumers and help realize the potato’s full potential as a “food of the future”.

Over the next two decades, the world’s population is expected to grow on average by more than 100 million people a year. More...
Potatoes are good for you
Potatoes are rich in carbohydrates, making them a good source of energy. They have the highest protein content (around 2.1 percent on a fresh weight basis) in the family of root and tuber crops, and protein of a fairly high quality, with an amino-acid pattern that is well matched to human requirements. They are also very rich in vitamin C — a single, medium-sized potato contains about half the recommended daily intake — and contain a fifth of the recommended daily value of potassium.

Demand for potatoes is growing
World potato production has increased at an annual average rate of 4.5 percent over the last 10 years, and exceeded the growth in production of many other major food commodities in developing countries, particularly in Asia. While potato consumption has declined in Europe, it has increased in the developing world from less than 10 kg per capita in 1961-1963 to almost 22 kg in 2005. Consumption of potatoes in developing countries is still less than a quarter of that in Europe, but all evidence suggests it will increase strongly in the future.

Potatoes are a truly global food
The potato has been consumed in the Andes for about 8 000 years. Brought to Europe by the Spanish in the 16th century, it quickly spread across the globe: today potatoes are grown on an estimated 193 000 sq km of farmland, from China’s Yunnan plateau and the subtropical lowlands of India, to Java’s equatorial highlands and the steppes of the Ukraine.

Potatoes feed the hungry
The potato should be a major component in strategies aimed at providing nutritious food for the poor and hungry. It is ideally suited to places where land is limited and labour is abundant, conditions that characterize much of the developing world. The potato produces more nutritious food more quickly, on less land, and in harsher climates than any other major crop — up to 85 percent of the plant is edible human food, compared to around 50 percent in cereals.