

Original Research

# Evaluation of the suitability of potato cultivation areas in South Korea based on climate and soil conditions

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## Abstract

**Background:** Changes in dietary patterns have led to a decrease in rice consumption, raising demands for the cultivation of alternative crops that meet the current requirements. Potatoes are highly productive and can be stored for a relatively long period, thereby ensuring adequate income for farmers; however, optimal cultivation is necessary to maximize yield. **Objective:** This study proposes optimal cultivation regions for potato considering climate and soil conditions. **Materials and methods:** The CLIMEX model was developed to evaluate climatic suitability, while the soil suitability was scored based on five soil characteristics. The final areal suitability for potato cultivation was classified into 4 levels: very suitable, suitable, marginal, and unsuitable. **Results:** Overall, 36.5% of South Korea had very suitable climate, but areas with the best values for soil conditions were approximately 10% of the climatically suitable areas. When considering the climate and soil conditions simultaneously, climatic suitability and soil condition were inversely related, resulting in only 1.2% of optimal areas with Jeju Island as the most suitable area. **Conclusions:** Because both climate and soil conditions need to be suitable for growing crops, this study can provide potential paddy-cultivation areas for potato cultivation and a method for evaluating suitable areas for crop cultivation.

**Keywords:** CLIMEX; potato; climatic suitability; soil suitability; suitable cultivation area

## 1. Introduction

Annual rice consumption in South Korea and other rice cultivation areas have consistently decreased due to climate change, and changes in household eating habits [1]. Overall, arable land utilization has steadily decreased since 1970, leading to cultivation areas constituting only 16.9% of the total land area [2,3]. However, there is a disparity between rice supply and demand because of an increase in rice production. Hence, there has been an effort to flexibly use paddy fields for stable rice supply and enhance food self-sufficiency by producing (or rotating) other crops in paddy fields [4]. For example, feed value, harvesting time, and sowing period were compared under forage cropping systems [5,6]. Other studies of cropping systems investigated productivity and income of potato-corn in fields and paddies [7], sesame seed [8], and optimal forage crops in paddy fields in summer and winter [9]. Potential areas for apple cultivation have also been investigated [10,11]. Moreover, suitable areas for growing Italian ryegrass have been predicted in Gangwon-do [12] using a spatial distribution model [13]. Because climate change affects crops and their cultivation area [14], suitable growing areas have been identified for southern-type garlic [15], black raspberry [16], and teff and barley [17]. In this analysis, a geographic information system (GIS)-based analytic hierar-

chy process was used [16,18]. Studies concerning upland-paddy rotation has evaluated the effect of growth and yield on reclaimed tidal land [19], and on foxtail millet, proso millet, sorghum, and rice [4].

Various alternative crops for rice have been proposed, such as sweet potatoes, potatoes, and corn [14]. Among them, potatoes are favored as an alternative crop for rice by farmers because of advantages of relatively easy cultivation, long-term storage capacity and high productivity. Nevertheless, both quantity and quality of potatoes are greatly affected by climate and soil conditions [2,20,21]. Hence, it is necessary to consider both these factors while identifying potential areas for potato cultivation.

The CLIMEX model, a species distribution modeling tool specialized for climate-based prediction, can project potential distributions of a species by identifying climatically suitable areas [22–24], and has been widely applied to predict the climatic suitability of plants such as prickly acacia [25], common bean [26], and potato [27,28]. Soil suitability for crop cultivation is known to be a function of variables that define texture, drainage class, and slope [11,12]. A previous study predicted suitable cultivation regions for medicinal plants [29], while [30] reported major environmental factors affecting the geographical distribution and quality of *Scutellaria baicalensis*. In addition,



there are some studies which predicted suitable areas for plant inhabitation, such as *Panax notoginseng* under various climatic conditions [31], habitat suitability modeling of *Perilla frutescens* [32], and prediction of current and future cultivation areas of *Carthamus tinctorius* [33].

The suitability of climate and soil for potato cultivation in South Korea can be evaluated using the CLIMEX model and the maximum limiting characteristic method [34]. This study aims to investigate the suitability of the climate and soil of paddy-cultivation areas for potato cultivation, and to propose an optimal area for field potato cultivation in South Korea based on the evaluation.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1 Description of the study area

South Korea is geographically located in the mid-latitude temperate zone (N 33°–N 39°) with cold-dry winters, and hot-humid summers. The annual temperatures are measured from approximately –6 to 26 °C during the year with the average annual temperature of 10–15 °C [35]. The annual precipitation is approximately ranged from 1000 to 1900 mm, while 50 to 60% of the precipitation occurs in summer [35]. In general, topography of South Korea can be divided into mountainous areas, hilly areas, mountain foot slopes, grain areas, alluvial fan areas, and flat areas. However, the topography is highly complex and the soil characteristics are also varied by areas [36].

### 2.2 Soil data acquisition and processing to calculate the soil suitability

Five soil variables were used to determine the soil suitability ( $N_1$ ) for potato cultivation: soil texture, drainage class, slope, effective soil depth (the depth to which the roots can potentially extend), and gravel content. The data were obtained from the National Spatial Data Infrastructure [37] in polygon format. Data for five soil variables were determined and extracted using a 1 km-grid coordinate system (140,237 points) process using ArcGIS (version 10.4.1, ESRI, Redland, CA, USA), and the extracted points were converted into a raster format. Consequently, a spatial database recording values for five soil variables with a 1 km resolution in South Korea was constructed to calculate  $N_1$ . The values were then used to score the suitability for potato cultivation based on the criteria provided by the Rural Development Administration (RDA) in South Korea [38,39] (Table 1).  $N_1$  was calculated using the spatial analysis tool in ArcGIS by summing the scores of five soil variables with a maximum value of 100.  $N_1$  was classified into four grades according to the soil survey manual [38]: very suitable ( $\geq 85$ ), suitable (80–84), marginal (70–79), unsuitable ( $\leq 69$ ), and impossible ( $= 0$ ) (Table 1).

### 2.3 Climate suitability using the CLIMEX model

The CLIMEX (version 4.0, Hearne software, Australia) model predicts the potential distribution of a target

species based on meteorological information and estimated model parameters from biological information. The possibility of species distribution is quantified using the Ecoclimatic Index (EI), which is a representative of climatic suitability resulting from the growth index (GI) and stress index (SI) [22,40]. Potatoes are generally not exposed to stressful climates because they are predominantly cultivated in favorable climates. Hence, the EI for potato was determined based only on the parameter related to GI, meaning that EI and GI values were the same, because SI could not be calculated for potato. Thus, climatic suitability ( $N_2$ ) was classified using the GI values. A GI value of 50 is the general maximum value in the CLIMEX model and indicates a favorable climate sustained during the six-month cultivation period. A GI value of 25 (for growth over three months) was considered to be the best for potato growth in South Korea because potato generally requires three months after sowing seed potato [41]. Consequently, we classified  $N_2$  into five categories; very suitable ( $GI \geq 25$ ), suitable ( $25 > GI \geq 20$ ), marginal ( $20 > GI \geq 10$ ), unsuitable ( $10 > GI \geq 1$ ) and impossible conditions ( $GI = 0$ ) to grow the potato in paddy fields. The details of the operation of the CLIMEX model are described in [22] and [40]. The climate variables were obtained from WorldClim (<http://worldclim.org/version2>) (monthly maximum temperature, minimum temperature, and rainfall with 1 km spatial resolution) [42], and were clipped to fit for South Korea.

### 2.4 Parameter estimation of potato to use CLIMEX model

Temperature Index (TI), Moisture Index (MI), and Light Index (LI) were among seven indices necessary for calculating GI, and were used by considering data availability. In addition, CLIMEX calculates minimum degree-days required to complete a generation by using a parameter of population degree day (PDD). TI has four parameters from DV0 to DV3, and DV0 and DV3 designate the lower and upper threshold temperature of the target species. MI includes four parameters from SM0 to SM3, representing the lower and upper threshold soil moisture, respectively, and determined by the amount of precipitation in a specific area. The CLIMEX parameters of potato were employed from a previous study [24], and adjusted for the growing conditions for major Korean potatoes such as Superior, suggested by the RDA [30] (Table 2). The RDA reported that the suitable temperature range for growing potato was 14–23 °C, with a suitable daytime temperature of 23–24 °C. Therefore, the lower optimal (DV1) and upper optimal (DV2) temperatures, which encode the optimal temperature range for species growth, were set to 14 °C and 24 °C, respectively, while the limiting high temperature (DV3) was adjusted to 30 °C, which inhibits the obesity of the tuber. In South Korea, potato growth has been affected by droughts and flooding in the spring and summer, respectively. Hence, the parameters related to soil moisture were modified based on the relationship between potato produc-

**Table 1. Standard soil suitability values for potato from the soil and environmental information system of the Rural Development administration.**

Soil characteristics	Grade			
	Poor (5)	Normal (10)	Proper (15)	Good (20)
Soil texture	Sandy	Clayey	Clay loam Silty clay loam	Sandy loam Silty sandy loam
Drainage class	Poor	Excessively well	Moderately	Well
Slope (%)	>15	7–15	2–7	0–2
Effective soil depth (cm)	<20	20~50	50~100	>100
Gravel content (%)	>35		<10	10–35

**Table 2. Parameter values used for potato in CLIMEX.**

Parameters	Code	Previous values	Adjusted values
Temperature			
Limiting low temperature (°C)	DV0	4	4
Lower optimal temperature (°C)	DV1	16	14
Upper optimal temperature (°C)	DV2	25	24
Limiting high temperature (°C)	DV3	40	30
PDD		950	950
Moisture			
Limiting low soil moisture	SM0	0.05	0.2
Lower optimal soil moisture	SM1	0.2	0.4
Upper optimal soil moisture	SM2	0.8	1.6
Limiting high soil moisture	SM3	1.5	2.5
Light			
Daylength at no growth	LT1	10	10
Daylength at maximum growth	LT0	16	16

tion and seasonal precipitation in South Korea. In detail, the parameters of SM were set for Gangwon-do, the region with the highest production of wild potatoes, and we assumed that the amount of precipitation in that region was optimal for potato cultivation. The SM parameters were adjusted by setting SM0 to SM3 as the minimum and maximum precipitation in Gangwon-do. Finally, we verified the potential distribution comparing the regional capacity of potatoes in administrative district and GI value.

### 2.5 Assessment of suitability to cultivate potato

The final suitable sites for cultivation of potato ( $S_n$ ) were classified into four categories by simultaneously considering  $N_1$  and  $N_2$ : very suitable ( $S_1$ : both  $N_1$  and  $N_2$  were very suitable), suitable ( $S_2$ : either  $N_1$  or  $N_2$  were suitable or above), possible ( $S_3$ : either  $N_1$  or  $N_2$  were marginal or above), and unsuitable ( $S_4$ : either  $N_1$  or  $N_2$  were unsuitable or above). We concluded that locations where potato cultivation was impossible did not exist in South Korea, as it only accounted for approximately  $10^{-6}$  percentage of the total area.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1 Soil suitability for potato

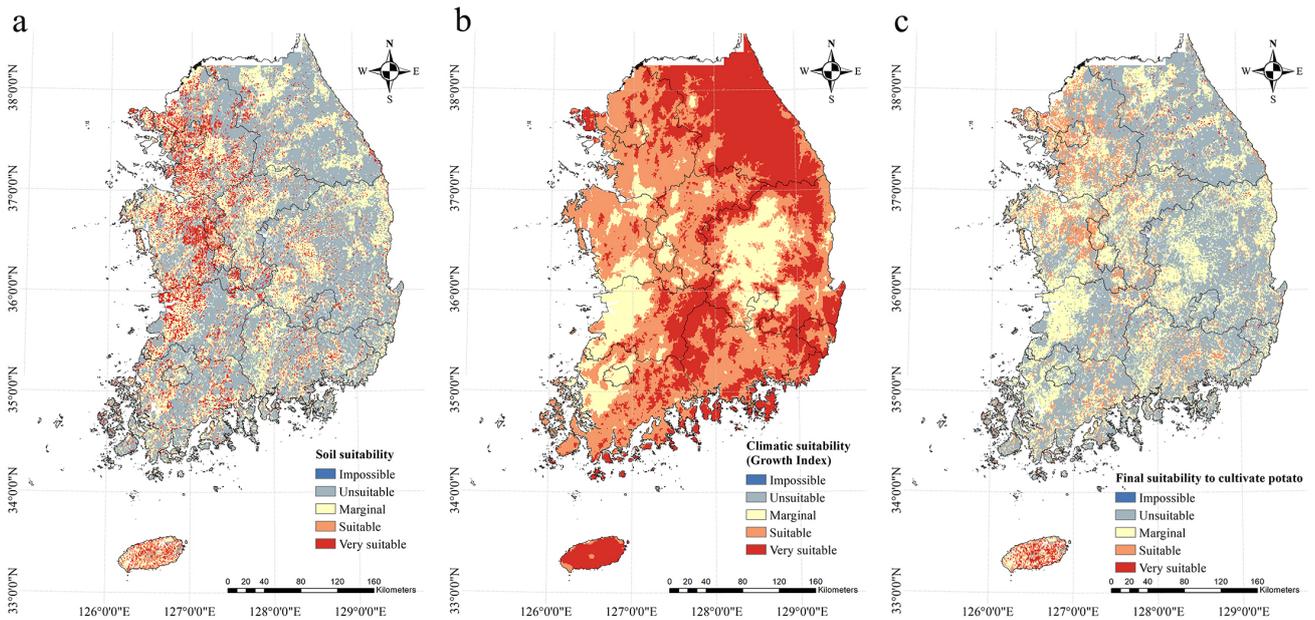
The crop yields are related to physical properties of the soil, and they affect growth differently depending on the crop [43]. Even for the same variety, potatoes show differences in growth and quality depending on the soil type, and are sensitive to climate, suggesting the necessity for proposing areas for its cultivation by considering both climatic and soil conditions [44].

Among the soil variables, soil texture had the highest value, with an average of 17.3, whereas the slope showed the lowest average score of 8 (a high value means that there are many suitable areas for growing potatoes). Approximately 90% of the soil texture at the calculated suitability points was either optimal or suitable, while only 1.2% of the area was scored as inadequate (Fig. 1A, Table 3). In general, plant length and yield have been reported to be long and high, respectively, in the order clay loam, loam, and sandy loam [45,46]. Considering the above criteria, South Korea had a very suitable environment for potato cultivation; in this study, approximately 50% of the regions were found to be sandy loam. In addition to potatoes, soybean [47], broadleaf liriopoe [48], Asian lizard's tail [49], and sesame

**Table 3. Ratio of areas to cultivate potato for different soil and climate conditions.**

Factors	Ratio of optimal area (%)	Ratio of suitable area (%)	Ratio of marginal area (%)	Ratio of unsuitable area (%)	*Ratio of etc. (%)	Average score of suitability (SD)
Drainage class	32.3	7.6	45.7	10.8	3.6	13.2 (5.3)
Texture	49.7	40.4	4.1	1.2	4.6	17.3 (3.2)
Effective depth	18.2	37.8	21.8	18.6	3.6	12.9 (5.0)
Gravel contents	31.7	34.8	-	29.9	3.6	13.6 (6.1)
Slope	9.0	10.9	11.0	65.5	3.6	8.0 (5.0)
Growth Index	37.6	45.7	16.7	<0.1	0	23.1 (3.7)

\* This ratio means that proportion not analyzed in the model.

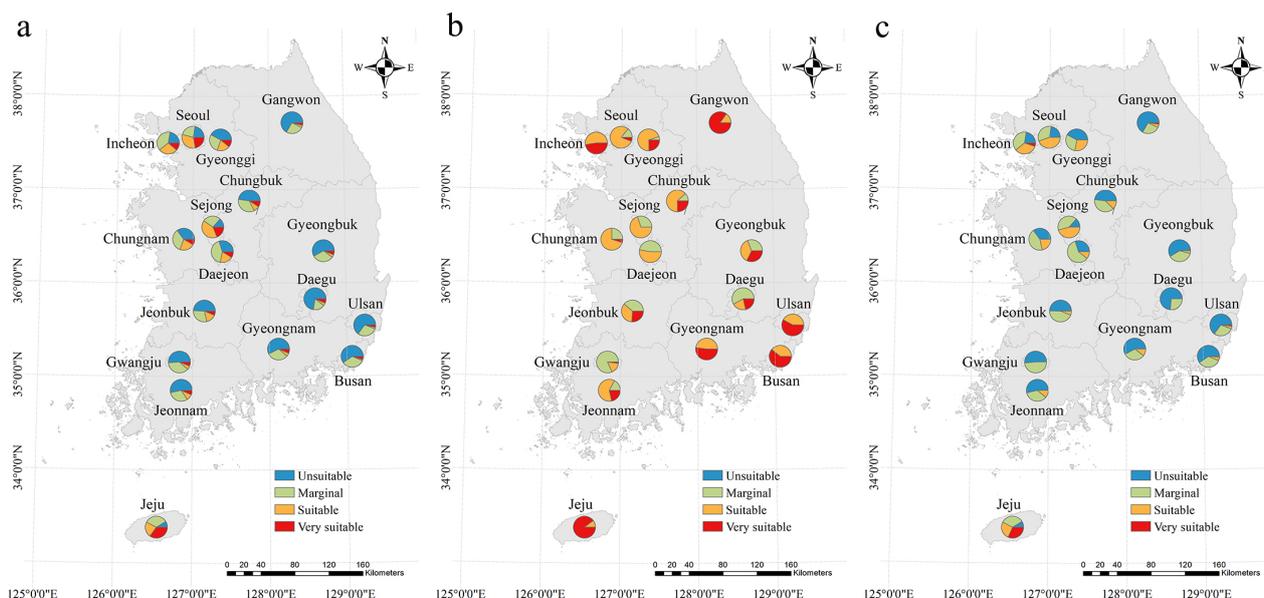


**Fig. 1. Maps showing (a) soil, (b) climate, and (c) soil + climate suitability for cultivating potato.**

[50] grow well in sandy loam soils, indicating that South Korean soil is suitable for cultivating various crops. In contrast, the values for slope indicated unfavorable conditions; high slopes are unsuitable for potato cultivation. Approximately 65% of the areas scored based on the slope were evaluated to be unsuitable, while 20% of the areas were above suitable. Consequently,  $N_1$  changed significantly with slope. A previous study also reported that the slope and elevation explain 22% to 36% variability of yield for potato tuber [51]. In addition, the slope was reported to be inversely correlated with the potato yield because of limited mechanization of field crops at a high slope, which was consistent with the current result. For this reason, it is necessary to cultivate potatoes in flat areas for high potato production [52,53].

When analyzing the soil variable score and overall suitability, approximately 50% of areas in South Korea were classified as unsuitable for potato cultivation, while only 16% of the area was suitable or optimal. The Jeju-do region was found to have the best soil for potato cultivation (Fig. 2A). Jeju-do and Gwangju scored the best and

worst drainage classes, respectively. In addition, Gwangju had the lowest score for soil texture in South Korea, while Sejong showed the highest score. The effective soil depth and gravel content were higher in Sejong than in any other region, but Daegu scored the lowest. A high gravel content may increase the incidence of physiological disorders in potato [54]. According to a previous study [39], reported that field crops yield high gravel content; suitable levels of gravel facilitate good drainage, which is advantageous for growth [55]. An effective soil depth is the depth at which crops can reach roots and absorb air, water, and nutrients [46]. Accordingly, the deeper the effective soil depth, the better the crop growth. In particular, the maximum yield was confirmed at 75 cm or more in sandy loam and 100 cm in loam and loam soil. However, at a lower effective soil depth, the soil volume for storing water and nutrients is small, resulting in poor growth of the roots and reduced yield [46]. For this reason, it is worthwhile to project a potential distribution of potatoes using effective soil depth and gravel content because high potato yield can be obtained with suitable site classified by the effective soil depth. In



**Fig. 2.** Ratio of (a) soil, (b) climate, and (c) soil + climate suitability to cultivate potato in 17 administrative districts.

this study, an effective soil depth of more than 50 cm was found in 56% of the total area in South Korea, while in approximately 44% of the area, it was 50 cm or less. Incheon and Gangwon had the most and least suitable slope, respectively, for potato cultivation. In general, the soil conditions for potato cultivation were relatively more suitable in Sejong, Jeju-do, Incheon, and Seoul compared to other regions.

In terms of the ratio of suitable cultivation areas, the Jeju-do region, which scored the highest soil suitability, had 35% of the optimal areas for potato cultivation, while Ulsan, with 4% of suitable areas, had the lowest score. The ratio of suitable and marginal areas was high in Sejong and Daejeon, and the least favorable scores were mainly observed in the eastern region, including Daegu, which showed the lowest soil suitability for potato cultivation. In contrast, only 9% of the unsuitable areas were found in Jeju-do, which was the lowest score among the different regions in South Korea.

### 3.2 Climatic suitability of potato

Most regions in South Korea were predicted to be suitable for potato cultivation, particularly in regions with high elevation and low temperatures (Fig. 1B). However, the  $N_2$  of Gyeongsangbuk-do and Jeollabuk-do was relatively low compared to other provinces, suggesting that the climate might not be suitable for cultivating potatoes (Fig. 2B). Favorable values of  $N_2$  in South Korea were evaluated to be 36.5%, mainly occurring in Gangwon-do and Jeju-do, where either suitable or marginal areas were 58.6%, and unsuitable areas were less than 0.1% (Table 3).

Potatoes vary considerably in yield and quality depending on the environmental conditions, but the most influential factor is temperature [20,56,57]. However, it

was reported that annually harvested crops, such as potato, rarely suffer from the effects of external temperatures as they grow only during climatically favorable conditions [58]. In this study, only GI was used to predict climatic suitability, excluding SI, because most of the potatoes were sown and planted at specific times, indicating that it is not generally exposed to external climatic stresses. In contrast, SI needs to be considered in addition to GI in wild plants (e.g., wild ginseng). Some crops are constantly exposed to unfavorable conditions, causing climatic stresses. In CLIMEX, an SI of 100 or higher indicates an impossible condition for plant grow, so SI can be useful for finding a suitable cultivation area even though it was not used in for potato due to the above reason.

Favorable scores for  $N_2$  in Jeju-do was approximately 90%, which was the highest, followed by Gangwon-do (84%), with the largest areal size (14,173 km<sup>2</sup>) (Fig. 2B). The regions with less than 5% scores for ratio of very suitable areas were Seoul, Gwangju, Daejeon, Sejong, and Chungcheongnam-do, which are located in the west. Even though the ratio of  $GI \geq 25$  was low in Seoul, approximately 80% of the areas showed a suitable climate ( $25 > GI \geq 20$ ). In addition, Gyeonggi-do, Chungcheongnam-do, and Sejong were assessed to have a high level of suitable areas (approximately 70%). The ratio of the marginal ( $20 > GI \geq 10$ ) area was highest in Gwangju (approximately 80%), while Gyeongsangbuk-do showed the widest marginal area (5890 km<sup>2</sup>). The unsuitable area only occurred in Daegu, but it was only 0.6%. Collectively, temperature was expected to be very suitable for potato cultivation during summer in Gangwon-do, while it would be suitable for spring and fall in other areas. In addition, precipitation was found to occur throughout the country, but torrential downpour during the summer could drastically reduce the climatic suitability,

proposing high flood damage in Gangwon-do and Jeju-do, where summer precipitation is higher than in other regions [59].

### 3.3 Optimal cultivation areas based on climate and soil conditions

The ratio of areas very suitable for potato cultivation based on climate and soil conditions ( $S_1$ ) in South Korea was 1.2%, with the highest value in Jeju-do, which showed 32% of suitable areas and the largest areal size of 388 km<sup>2</sup> in Gangwon-do (Fig. 1C,2C). Conditions for  $S_1$  were not satisfied in 5 of the 17 administrative districts in South Korea, and  $S_1$  was less than 1% in 7 districts (Fig. 2C). The proportion of suitable areas ( $S_2$ ) was 10.9%, and they were mainly distributed in Seoul, Sejong, Gyeonggi-do, and Chungcheongnam-do, with a value of approximately 45% in Seoul and Sejong. In addition, marginal suitability ( $S_3$ ) and unsuitability ( $S_4$ ) were 33.2% and 49.8%, respectively, suggesting that most of the South Korean regions were categorized into  $S_3$  and  $S_4$ . Daejeon showed the highest value for  $S_3$  at 59.2%, while 72.9% of Daegu fell into  $S_4$ , which was the highest ratio throughout the country. In conclusion, more than half of the land in South Korea was not suitable for cultivating potatoes, largely because of the low soil suitability observed in approximately 50% of the country. Moreover, climatic and soil suitability was projected in opposite patterns, with few areas showing favorable values for both factors. Nevertheless,  $S_1$  was highest in the high-altitude region of Gangwon-do, which is consistent with the fact that it has the highest potato production capacity in South Korea [60].

Previous study established that there was considerable variation in crop cultivation to bioclimatic factors in current scenarios, showing direct influence on areas where potato cultivation in mountainous areas between 2000 and 4000 meters above sea level [61]. In South Korea, there was a region-wide difference in  $N_2$ , but in most regions, it was suitable to cultivate potatoes at a specific time. Accordingly, it was predicted that in most regions, the plants would be more sensitive to soil conditions. In particular, because the area with  $N_1 > 85$  was only 10% of the area with  $N_2 > 25$ ,  $N_1$  would have a greater influence on the area of  $S_n$ . Therefore, in the case of Korea, it may be desirable to select land for potato cultivation by first considering the soil conditions rather than climate.

Previous studies which predicted the growth, production, and distribution of potatoes were reported, such as global potential potato production according to climate change [27], and the potential amount of potato yield in suitable sites by seasons [62]. Most studies were modeled by analyzing climate and soil conditions [27,51,62], while this study related scores of five soil variables and the climate suitability of potatoes using CLIMEX. For this reason, we expect that this study provides detail information necessary for potato cultivation. In particular, since CLIMEX

uses time-series climate data (monthly average temperature and rainfall), this result has demonstrated the climatic suitability of potatoes based on scientific evidence compared to the potential distribution of potatoes in previous studies [11,13,27]. For example, a previous study used annual climate data to confirm the potential distribution of potatoes [27], so it is difficult to obtain a dynamic potential distribution considering monthly variation of climates. In contrast, CLIMEX is a semi-dynamic model that calculates monthly temperature, precipitation, and duration of light to derive regional suitability of species, suggesting detail response to climatic condition compared to existing studies [22,27].

Climatic conditions in South Korea are known to be unfavorable for potato cultivation [63,64]. Rainy season begins at the harvest time for spring potatoes in South Korea, causing poor quality due to a high amount of precipitation, while heat damage during sowing time of autumn potato has been observed [63–65]. Similarly, this study evaluated that approximately 80% of regions were marginal suitable or unsuitable even though this study focused on geographic suitability rather than time-climate relationship during cultivation [28]. However, as this study used soil and climatic conditions which were major factor determining the suitable area of potato cultivation, the selected regions ( $S_1$  and  $S_2$ ) suggests relatively suitable areas in South Korea when cultivating potatoes as an alternative crop.

## 4. Conclusions

A suitable area with high climate and soil suitability for crop cultivation is important to enhance crop productivity, and both factors must be considered for field cultivation. This study investigated suitable paddy-cultivation areas for the field cultivation of potatoes in South Korea by simultaneously considering climate and soil conditions. The current results proposed that optimal potato cultivation depended mainly on soil conditions rather than climate and Jeju Island as the most suitable area having the best climate and soil conditions in South Korea. This result can be used as information for selecting potato cultivation sites with less risk and high productivity to a farmer with fallow land. Even though non-environmental factors, such as economic concerns, transportation, and distance from local markets, must be taken into consideration to choose an optimal cultivation area, this study can function as a basic evaluation because climate and soil are the most important determinants. In the future, the aforementioned non-environmental factors may be included in the evaluation step so that the most optimal and practical potato cultivation areas can be proposed.

## Author contributions

J-YS and J-MJ equally participated in the design, analysis, and writing the manuscript. W-HL supervised the study and revised manuscript.

## Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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