



TOMATOES 'TIL FROST

If you want home-grown tomatoes all fall and your spring planting normally wears out too soon, consider planting more tomatoes in July. Plant them deeply, keep them well-watered and mulched, and provide some shade till the new plants are established enough to withstand our intense Texas sun. Tomatoes love the heat and will grow more rapidly than your spring crop.

If you can't find nursery transplants now, start some from seed in pots of sterile seed-start mix. Some gardeners have good luck with cuttings from existing plants, rooting them in a glass of water for transplanting.

Late tomato plantings will likely have plenty of tomatoes in various stages of maturity when a frost does come this fall. Just pull up the whole plant and place in your garage to pick as they ripen. Or you can pick all the immature tomatoes and place them in a newspaper-lined and covered box in a cool place. Check these tomatoes daily. Though you will lose some, it is possible you will be eating fresh sliced tomatoes for Christmas dinner.

Patsy Besch, Smith County Master Gardener

FERTILIZE TOMATOES WITH POT METHOD

The tomato is the most popular of all the garden vegetables and is grown in about 92 percent of home gardens.

One method to try for increasing your tomato yield was developed by Dr. Sam Contner at Texas A&M University called "the Texas pot method."

Prepare and fertilize your soil as usual. Before planting, soak the tomato transplants for an hour in a starter solution of 1/2 strength water-soluble fertilizer. Plant transplants 3 feet apart, placing a cup of starter solution in each hole.

Next, bury a one-gallon nursery pot or other container with three to five holes in the bottom between each tomato plant so the lip is just above soil level.

When the tomatoes begin to set, place one tablespoon of 21-0-0 or 34-0-0 in each pot and fill it with water.

Let it drain then refill two or three times. Repeat every 10 days during the growing season. This method places nutrients six to eight inches below the soil surface, directly in the root zone.

Douglas Hine, Smith County Master Gardener

TOMATOES

Tomato growing is interesting and fun because of the endless good options you have. There are many sizes, shapes and colors - and lots of decisions to make. Should you stake or cage plants or allow them to sprawl on the ground? Should you prune out suckers (those little branches at the leaf axils)? Do you want plants for canning or for a steady fresh supply? Should you plant early, midseason or late types - or some of all three? Here are some helpful hints.

- Look for transplants with healthy green leaves and no flower bunches; avoid plants with yellow, thin, scraggly stems.
- Porter tomato has small fruit and does well in East Texas; it can be grown in containers.
- Celebrity (VFNT) is a medium-to-large firm slicing tomato; the initials VFNT indicate that it is disease resistant. Celebrity does well in East Texas and will mature in midseason, about 70 days from the time it is set out.
- Tall varieties do best when staked or held off the ground in a wire tomato cage. Staked plants benefit from more sunlight and better air circulation. Continue tying staked plants to their support as they grow taller.
- Prune staked plants by removing side shoots where branches meet stem to get larger, earlier fruit. Pinch the side shoots out when they are about 1/4-inch long.
- You may wish to pinch out the top of the plant once it has grown four flower bunches; this encourages the plant to ripen its fruit instead of growing taller.
- Your tomato plants will thrive when given an abundance of sun. However, they should be in a sheltered place, protected from blazing heat or gusting winds.

Barbara Mole, Smith County Master Gardener

TIMELY TIPS FOR TOMATOES

My favorite fruit is a big, red, juicy tomato! However, many factors enter into the successful production of this easy-to-grow fruit. Select a site that gets about 8 hours of sun each day. Begin soil prep in late February. Raise the bed if in a clay soil. Tomatoes like soil with a pH of 5.5 to 7.0, organically enriched, friable, and well-drained. Remove weeds and till. Add calcium or dolomite to raise the pH. Work in about 2-3 pounds of a 10-20-20 fertilizer per 100 square feet of garden.

Plant variety is up to the gardener. Select a strong, stocky plant, one that grows best in the East Texas area, and is disease resistant - look for the VFNT hybrid. My favorite is 'Celebrity', but 'Carnival', 'Merced', 'OG50', 'Big Boy', 'Heatwave', 'Sun Master', and 'Homestead' also do well here.

Planting time is about mid-March, when the greatest chance of frost is past. Plants should be 2-3' apart in rows that are 3' apart. Bury the plant stem, leaving only the top 3 or 4 true leaves above ground to promote greater root structure. Use 1 pint of diluted starter solution or diluted fish emulsion with each plant.

Support your local tomato! Extended care calls for staking or placing a wire cage around your plants when they are about 2' tall. Caged plants yield more fruit while plants laying on the ground are prone to fruit rot and leaf diseases. When plants begin blooming, pinch out sucker shoots and the top shoot. This will help fruit ripen and will add fruit, not tall growth.

Mulch the plants early and maintain a uniformly moist soil. Water early in the day. When the fruit is about golf ball size, side dress with a high nitrogen (ammonium sulfate) 21-0-0 fertilizer at the rate of about 1 tablespoon per plant. You can also help prevent blossom end rot at this time by treating with a mixture of 1 tablespoon ice cream salt dissolved in a gallon of water. Treat three days in a row. Proper irrigation, mulching and/or raising beds can also help prevent blossom end rot and keep fruit from cracking.

Companion plantings of nasturtiums, and poppies will attract insects that eat aphids and give you more peace of mind.

Good luck and good gardening!

Bill Kelldorf, Smith County Master Gardener

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