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Dry Farm This Year's Tomatoes

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SUMMARY

If you want to grow wonderful tomatoes without paying higher water bills, try dry farming, a method that limits the amount of water used on vegetables such as tomatoes.

Q. I have purchased dry farmed tomatoes at the Farmers Market and absolutely loved them, they were so flavorful. Is it possible to do dry farming at home?

A. Dry farming is a method by which tomatoes, as well as grains, grapes, fruit trees, winter squash and other deep rooted food crops, are planted and trained to access retained subsurface water, instead of relying upon irrigation. The plants and fruit are smaller, but the sugar in the fruit is more concentrated and therefore sweeter than irrigated plants. The skin on the tomatoes may also be a bit tougher.

The native clay soil that makes up much of Contra Costa County is ideal for dry farming because it retains water, while sandy soil, like that in raised beds, dries out too quickly..

Soil preparation is the first step. Your garden bed may first need to be watered well and deep, and then allowed to dry out a bit before digging. Do this as soon as possible in the spring. The soil should be moist enough that you can

easily crumble a handful. If it is too wet or too dry, digging will result in poor soil structure that cannot support the plants well.

- Double dig your entire bed of native clay soil to fluff up and aerate the soil to a depth of 18 to 24 inches. Avoid walking on the bed once finished.
- Add one to two inches of finished compost and mix it into the top three to six inches of the double dug bed.
- Water well, add a layer of straw or leaf mulch and wait for planting day.

An entire bed needs to be prepared, because one or two holes alone will have too much compacted clay soil around them to allow the tomato roots to grow.

Seedling preparation

Keep your seedlings in a warm location and allow them to get tall and a little leggy by not pinching them back. Continue to care for them and perhaps repot into gallon pots in order to give the roots more room for strong growth.



"Do not be tempted to water your tomatoes after fruit begins developing because irregular watering can result in a disease called blossom end rot."

The taller they are, the deeper you can plant them in the ground. All those little hairs along the stem will become roots when the stems are buried.

How and when to plant

Early to mid-May is typically warm enough for planting. When dry farming, plants need to be spaced about four to five feet apart in order to have enough water resources.

- Dig holes deep enough to leave only the top four to five inches of the seedlings above ground level.
- Add a specially formulated tomato fertilizer to the soil, water the hole and let it drain.
- Pinch or cut off all the leaves and branches up to the top four or five inches of the plant and pinch off any flowers and suckers between the branches.
- Plant the tomato, mixing a little compost with the clay, and leaving the top leaves and branches exposed.

How to water

- Water deeply; cover the surrounding soil with three to four inches of leaf mulch, straw or other mulch.
- Water deeply a few days later and then once a week for three weeks.
- When you see fruit begin to develop, stop watering altogether. Do not be tempted to water your tomatoes after that because irregular watering can result in a disease called blossom end rot. If you have prepared the bed and mulched well, the tomatoes

should be able to find their own water by searching deeply into the soil.

If you like dry farming, use a cover crop in the fall.

Ideally, a cover crop of legumes would have been planted in the tomato bed the previous fall, and turned under in the spring as the legumes started to flower and the soil moisture content was at that crumbly stage. This adds nitrogen and organic material to the soil, which helps with the dry farming process. As tomatoes should not be planted in the same bed two years in a row, each fall prepare a new bed for next year's crop.

Not all varieties of tomatoes do well with a dry farming method. In Moraga, I have had good luck with Early Girl; Chianti Rose; Red and Yellow Brandywine; Sun Gold and Sweet 100 cherry tomatoes; and Black Krim. Be advised: Black Krim is so delicate you have to eat it right then and there, so take a loaf of rustic bread, some olive oil and some fresh mozzarella outside and enjoy!



Dry farmed tomatoes, picture courtesy of the Regents of the University of California