

San Francisco Chronicle | 3.1.2008 | Section F

# HOMIE

& Garden

## Master gardeners' picks for coastal gardens

By Pam Peirce

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

**I**n the Bay Area, near the coast, tomatoes are a source of frustration for gardeners.

What we want is a summerlong supply of richly flavored, tender-skinned, juicy tomatoes to replace the hard, flat-tasting supermarket kind.

What we often get, after a summer of impatient waiting, is a light crop of only slightly tastier, thick-skinned tomatoes — and not until late September and October. If we are lucky. If not, we get none at all.

From years of growing tomatoes in San Francisco, including trials I have conducted, I can offer some understanding and advice.

There are some permanent obstacles to good tomato growing. What the plants want is sun all day (or for a minimum of six hours), daytime temperatures between 75 and 95 degrees, and nighttime temperatures above 55 degrees. But near the coast, they must endure summer daytime temperatures that barely skim 70, long periods of fog, and nights that may drop below 55 degrees.

The cool temperatures and, on foggy days, low light, slow plant growth, so that the first ripe fruits may occur much later than the “days to maturity” (DTM) listed in the catalog, and they may be thicker-skinned and less flavorful.

The cold nights pose a special problem because tomato pollen can't fertilize the flowers if nights are colder than 55 degrees, so we often see less fruit than there were flowers.

Location can make as much difference as neighborhood. I conducted a tomato trial in the Outer Richmond neighborhood, just blocks from the beach. A row of houses on the west side blocked the wind, and no tall trees prevented sunlight from warming the air all day long, allowing a respectable tomato har-

► **TOMATOES:** Page F8

# THE KITCHEN GARDENER



Photos by VIRGINIA MARTIN

**MASTER GARDENERS:** Carol O'Donnell (right) takes some questions about the ever-frustrating, if scrumptious, tomato during last year's coastal tasting trials.

## Forthcoming sales

Master Gardeners tomato plant sales that will include varieties good for near-coastal locations:

### MARIN COUNTY

**April 12:** 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Pini Hardware, 1535 Novato Blvd., Novato.

**April 13:** 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Marin Art and Garden Center, 30 Sir Francis Drake Blvd., Ross.

For more information on the Marin Master Gardeners Third Annual Tomato Market, see [tomatomarket.org](http://tomatomarket.org).

### SANTA CLARA COUNTY

**April 12:** 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., 1650 Senter Road, San Jose (tomatoes and peppers)

For more information on the Santa Clara Master Gardeners Spring Garden Market, call the Master Gardener Hotline at (408) 282-3105, or see [mastergardeners.org/SGM](http://mastergardeners.org/SGM).

# PLANT WHEN TIME'S RIPE

## ► TOMATOES From Page F1

vest. On the other hand, years earlier, a much windier, partly shaded backyard behind my Richmond District apartment failed miserably as a growing site.

When you plant is also important. Waiting until April or May seems strange because early planting is a passion in many parts of the country. But our spring stays cool longer than that of most regions, and tomatoes are set back by cold soil. Our soil reaches 50 degrees, the minimum tomatoes can safely endure, only in April. (There are flukes, so some early plantings may bear out, but early plantings often don't catch up to later ones.)

Perhaps the most important de-

cision is which variety to plant. Most likely to succeed near the coast are ones that are rated at 70 or fewer days from a 6-week-old seedling to ripe fruit, though our cool weather is likely to stretch the date past that predicted on the plant tag. (Occasionally one with a DTM rating of more than 70 succeeds.)

Some gardeners swear by short, or determinate, plants that are extra early, for example 'Oregon Spring' (58 days). But production is limited on short plants, so I usually go for the tall, or indeterminate, varieties. Cherry tomatoes are always a good bet because these tall plants have many flowers.

Master gardeners in several Bay Area counties test tomato varieties



**SUCH VARIETY:** O'Donnell displays tomatoes for easy identification at the San Mateo County Master Gardeners' trials.

ies; those most relevant are Marin and San Mateo. Last summer, San Mateo County master gardeners did some preliminary tests in two sites: a windy site in Half Moon Bay about a block from the ocean, and at their Elkus Youth Ranch, a

more protected site a couple of miles inland.

At the coastal site, they reported the following successes. (Numbers in parentheses are days to maturity):

► 'Sweet 100' (65): Tall plants, very vigorous, huge, prolonged yield of red cherry tomatoes, intense, medium sweet flavor.

► 'Sungold' (57): Tall plants, medium vigor. Heavy yield of orange cherry tomatoes, intense sweet/tart flavor.

► 'Cherokee Purple' (80): Vigorous, heavy yield, large red/purple round fruit, partial late September ripening (some ripened indoors), mild flavor.

At Elkus Ranch, the following varieties showed promise:

► 'Black Krim' (75-90): Tall

plants, good production of large, slightly flattened maroon fruit with deep green shoulders. Intense flavor.

► 'Jaune Flamme' (or 'Flamme') (70): Tall thin plants, good production, orange fruit the size of a small apricot, strong, sweet flavor.

► 'Jetsetter F1' (64): Tall vigorous plants, good production of 2½-inch fruit with rich, well-balanced flavor.

► 'Taxi' (65-70): Short plants, not very vigorous, but heavy production for their size of yellow fruit to 1½ inches, meaty texture, mild flavor.

Marin County master gardeners test varieties each year and choose some to sell in an annual tomato plant sale. Sandy Meyers, Marin master gardeners tomato propagator, and Paula Jaffe, chairwoman of the Marin MG Tomato Market, reported several varieties that have shown reasonable success near the coast and that scored high in flavor.

As with San Mateo, they recommend the orange cherry 'Sungold,' which placed first in their tomato-tasting competition. And reflecting my own results, they suggest 'Early Girl' and 'Stupice' (see Golden Gate Gardener on Page F7). Here are some other suggestions:

► 'Sun Sugar' (62): Tall plants, orange cherry-size fruit, rated second for flavor.

► 'Chocolate Cherry' (70): Tall plants, maroon 1-inch fruit, third rated in flavor.

► 'Legend' (68): Short plants with some resistance to late blight, moderately large red fruit, fifth-

rated in flavor.

► 'Juliet Hybrid' (60): Tall plants with red oval fruits about 2 inches long, good tomato flavor.

► 'Gardeners Delight' (65): Tall plants, large cherry-size red fruit, very sweet flavor.

► 'Matina' (58): Tall plants, medium-size round red fruits, intense flavor some compare to beefsteak tomatoes.

► 'Sophie's Choice' (55): Short plants, orange red skin, red interior, medium to large flavorful fruit, good for containers.

► 'Bush Champion Hybrid' (70): Short plants, medium to large red fruit, excellent flavor, good for containers.

But if your patio is on the shady north side of your house, or the cold wind whips through your garden, often bearing deep fog, or diseases or gophers repeatedly dash your hopes, you can take heart at another peculiarity of the Bay Area climate — that the summer becomes warmer quickly as you travel inland. That means you may be able to locate a plot in a community garden with a better microclimate not far from where you live. In San Francisco, you can find gardens through the Web site of SF Gro ([sfgro.org](http://sfgro.org)). It also means that warmer summers are so close that wonderful heirloom and other delicious tomatoes reach us all summer from nearby farms. Farmers' markets and produce stores carry them, and they are definitely worth the trip to find them.

*Pam Peirce writes the weekly Golden Gate Gardener column. E-mail her at [home@sfchronicle.com](mailto:home@sfchronicle.com).*