



CARING FOR YOUR VEGETABLE PLANTS: TOMATOES

Tomatoes are warm-weather plants. They like sunshine and produce best when planted in a well-exposed area in the garden. The optimum temperature for tomato growth is between 80 and 90 degrees. The minimum night temperature for fruit set is between 50 and 55 degrees. In general, tomato transplants can be set out in the cooler coastal areas in May and, in the warmer interior valley, between late March and May.

Transplanting

For transplants, spread and mix organic matter and a high-phosphorus fertilizer over the area. Place plants about 2 feet apart in 4 to 5-foot rows. Allow for more room if the tomatoes will not be staked or caged. Mark where you want each plant and make the hole deep enough to bury the stem as far as the first leaf and large enough so the roots are not crowded. Place the plant deep into the hole. Press the soil firmly around the plant and water thoroughly to remove any air pockets. Water the plants immediately. If transplanting in hot weather, shade the plants in the middle of the day for the first week or use floating row cover.

Watering

Examine your soil visually and with your hands to determine the need for additional water. Water deeply by drip, furrow, or sprinkler irrigation to encourage deep rooting. However, avoid wetting the foliage or fruit with overhead watering. If you allow water to seep through to the top few inches of your soil only, root growth will be stunted and, in some crops, may cause blossom drop. Keep adequate moisture in the deeper soil layers even when plants are small. Deep moisture is harder to replace later in the growing season without over irrigating. Proper irrigation will keep your plants vigorous and help protect them from thrips damage and sunburn.



Fertilizing

Tomatoes need soil that is fertile, but not too high in nitrogen, since too much will inhibit fruiting. Work in organic matter, like compost, before planting and use a fertilizer that has more phosphorus and potassium than nitrogen or add a handful of bone meal. Tomatoes are heavy feeders and will probably benefit from a couple booster applications of fertilizer as they grow. Once tomatoes have begun to set fruit, apply an application of fertilizer with a moderate amount of nitrogen and again about a month later. Alternatively, you can lightly fertilize every two weeks from first blossom set until end of harvest.

Harvesting and storing

Don't leave ripe fruit on the vines longer than necessary. This may increase exposure to rain, which may lead to cracking. Harvesting before it rains also help avoid fruit molds such as gray mold. However, early harvest can lead to catfacing.

Generally, it is best to harvest red ripe fruit and store it at room temperature. However, if it can't be eaten right away, the fruit can be held in the refrigerator a few more days.

When harvesting less ripe but full-size fruit late in the season, pick them and store at 70° F to ripen. As they become pink, move them to cooler temperatures (55° F) and then to the refrigerator when fully ripe. To extend the tomato season, hold green fruit where the temperature stays over 50° F most of the time. When the tomatoes start to color, select the best to take to the kitchen for further ripening.

Pest Management

Thorough information on pest management in a vegetable garden can be read at: <http://www.ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/GARDEN/VEGES/tomato.html>.