



Over the Garden Fence



Growing Tomatoes in the Hot, Dry Sierra Foothills -- Part 2 of 3

By Bob Labozetta (UC Master Gardener)

Whether you sowed seeds in late February/early March or you purchased plants from a nursery, make sure your transplants are young, stocky seedlings instead of larger plants. They will establish more quickly and suffer less transplant shock, soon catching up in growth to larger plants.

“Harden off” your seedlings by exposing them gradually to an increasing number of daylight hours and outdoor temperatures until they can handle 6 hours outdoors. Start this process a week to 10 days before transplanting them into the garden. A sheltered location such as a cold frame or covered patio is preferable.

Even though you will be transplanting when the weather is still cool, **plant in the right place** for the hot, dry weather to come. Choose spots where tomatoes will receive morning sun, then filtered sun or light shade during the rest of the day. Small-fruited varieties -- like cherry tomatoes -- can be transplanted into containers (pots, buckets, planters, etc.).

Before setting out seedlings in a garden bed, spread 2 inches of compost or manure on the garden soil, along with 1 inch of moistened peat moss and 1 cup of 10-10-10 organic fertilizer per 100 square feet of gardening space. Work that combination into the top few inches of the soil.

Remove the lower leaves from the seedlings and plant them deeper than they were in the seedling cells or flats. The tomato plants will produce roots all along the buried stems, giving them a better chance to withstand hot weather. If your seedlings are lanky and spindly, consider planting the seedlings at an angle, almost horizontal. Roots will grow downward from and along the stem.

Avoid planting out too soon. Traditionally, the last frost date in this county is a range of dates from mid-May to mid-June, depending on your location (and courage). If you tempt Mother Nature, take these steps when frost or freeze threatens:

- **Bring containerized plants indoors.**
- **Water plants thoroughly before a freeze.**
- **Protect tender seedlings** with an inverted bucket or flower pot, or a layer of mulch. Uncover them in the morning when the temperature rises above freezing.
- **Cover the plants** with fabric, old bed sheets, burlap, or commercial frost cloths (avoid using plastic). Drape the cover over a frame to keep it from touching the foliage. The cover should drape to the ground. Uncover them in the morning when the temperature rises above freezing.

UC Master Gardeners of Mariposa County are located at 5009 Fairgrounds Rd., Mariposa. For more gardening and event information, visit our website (http://cemariposa.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardener/) and Facebook page (UC Master Gardeners of Mariposa County). UC Master Gardeners staff a Helpline serving all of Mariposa County (209-966-7078 or mgmariposa@ucdavis.edu). Listen to us on the radio at KRYZ 98.5 FM on Wednesdays at 2 pm and Saturdays at 5 pm.