

Choose the Right Tomatoes for Your Garden

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, April 13, 2018

Q: I would like to grow some tomatoes this year but I've not tried to grow my own before and I'm not sure what variety to choose. When looking online I see literally hundreds of different varieties. Are there better ones to grow here in Redding?

A: You are correct in saying that there are hundreds of tomato varieties. And yes, there are some that do better in our temperature extremes than others. Let me start by going over the two basic types of tomatoes.



(Photo: Getty Images)

Tomato varieties are categorized as either determinate or indeterminate. Determinate tomatoes tend to be more compact bush types that grow 2 to 3 feet tall. The determinate types will reach a certain age and then flower all at once so the fruit sets and ripens all at the same time. Many folks like these varieties if they are planning on canning or making sauce as you will get most of the fruit all at one time. These varieties are more likely to produce fruit even when conditions are not perfect, as is the case during many

Redding summers. Once determinate varieties have produced the one big crop, they'll set very little, if any, fruit the rest of the summer.

Indeterminate tomatoes will continue to grow and set fruit until frost kills them, if fruiting conditions are favorable. This type will grow all summer. They're vining and require caging or staking for support. A well-fed indeterminate tomato can grow 10 to 12 feet tall. The one drawback with these varieties is that they can be a bit pickier about setting fruit if the conditions are too hot or the temperature range between night and daytime temperatures is too extreme. Since Redding tends to have extremely hot weather in the summer, and many times a 50-degree difference between day and night-time temperatures, these varieties may wait and not produce until late fall when temperatures are a bit cooler. However, if conditions are good these varieties are the best as they'll produce larger crops over the entire summer.

I like to grow some of each type, and I think this is the best approach for the home gardener. It allows you to spread your fresh tomato harvest over the longest possible season. Plant determinate varieties for early summer tomatoes, and some of the indeterminate ones to ripen later in summer and fall. There's nothing like a vine-ripened tomato, fresh off the vine.

As for choosing varieties to grow from within each of these types, that's dependent on what type of tomato you enjoy. Tomatoes can range in size from the small marble-sized grape or cherry tomatoes, to more than a one-pound beefsteak type. Tomato colors can also vary from striped green, to yellow, orange, pink, red or dark red. The orange and yellow varieties tend to have low acid and a mild flavor. The paste type tomatoes are good for making salsa or sauce. Some of the darker reds have the best tomato flavor.

Come out to our Shasta College Plant Sale on Friday and Saturday and talk to our Shasta Master Gardeners about their favorite tomatoes.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.