

Growing the Best Tomatoes in Redding Heat

Lemoine Waite, Master Gardener, March 6, 2023

Q: I grew tomatoes last year but my plants produced very little. Can you provide some tips on how to get tomato plants to produce in Redding?

A: A good tomato harvest starts with growing strong, healthy plants. These basic steps will give your plants the best start and ensure that you are doing all you can to produce a bumper crop of tomatoes.

1. **Proper planting and spacing.** Plant tomato plants deep. It is best to pick off leaves from the lower stem and plant it so that the top of the soil is about half way up the stem. The tomato will root along the lower stem, providing a much stronger root system. Making sure that tomatoes have enough room to grow is also important. Indeterminate tomatoes need to be spaced 18-24 inches and should be trained to grow on stakes, while determinate tomatoes (bush type) need about 24 inches between plants. Choice of tomato variety may also help with your harvest. Determinate tomatoes tend to produce better in difficult growing conditions, like much of the summer in Redding.
2. **Staking and Shading.** Tomato plants should be staked, or caged if bush type, at planting time so that they are easier to tie to the stake. Stakes should be at least 4 feet tall and sturdy. Continue to tie the tomato plant to the stake as it grows. Staking minimizes spread of disease, keeps the fruit from rotting, and fruit will be easier to find and pick. Tomato plants need 6 hours of sun per day to grow well but can benefit from a 50 percent shade cloth strung up to provide shade from scorching afternoon sun.
3. **Watering and mulch.** Once plants are in the ground, mulch with at least 2 inches of compost, straw, or shredded leaves. This will keep soil temperatures cooler and minimize water loss. Plants should be watered regularly and not allowed to get too dry between watering, but should not be overwatered. It is best to use a soil probe or long screw driver to test soil moisture between watering to determine when to water. Plants allowed to dry out too much between each watering can develop fruit with blossom end rot (dry leather patches on the end of the fruit) caused by a lack of calcium in the developing fruit due to irregular watering. Avoid watering overhead as this can cause disease problems to develop.
4. **Feeding.** Tomato plants are heavy feeders and need regular fertilizer applications. Choose a fertilizer formulated for fruit and flower production. Fertilizers with nitrogen levels too high (above 10 percent), can encourage foliage growth with no fruit production. I also like to add a new layer of compost every few weeks to feed the soil and keep plants going all summer long, as organic matter tends to break down quickly in our warm summers.
5. **Pruning and pests.** Many gardening books call for pruning tomato plants. This is **not** a good idea in Redding as we need the foliage to protect the fruit from sunburn. The only pruning that may be beneficial is to remove leaves on the lower few inches of the stem to keep them from touching the ground in order to help minimize the spread of foliar diseases. If the problems you had last year with your tomatoes was due to disease or nematodes, you will want to choose varieties that are resistant or grafted onto disease resistant root stock. Checking plants for horn worms and other pest every few days, and removing any pests immediately, can minimize pest problems.