

NEWS RELEASE

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Garden Journals

Growing vegetables is hard work, and should not be attempted by couch potatoes, according to Robert Norris, a retired weed science professor from UC Davis. Norris has been gardening in the Central Valley for over 30 years, and through trial and error, has discovered many valuable insights. I had the opportunity to hear him speak in Stockton this past week.

What impressed me most about Norris' presentation was that it was based on his garden journal. Every year he recorded planted varieties success and failure rates. He even kept track of how many pounds of vegetables harvested from each plant to help him determine the most productive varieties.

During his speech he made this interesting statement: "There is no such thing as a bad tomato year." Norris noted that when many gardeners report low quantities of tomatoes harvested, tomato farmers never seem to have this problem. Why? "Farmers know which varieties to plant, while home gardeners are planting the wrong kinds of tomato.

When a tomato plant fails to "set", the blossom drops off instead of developing into a fruit. As a horticulturist, I (the author) tell people this has to do with temperature fluctuations. During cold weather, a gardener can spray blossoms with a fruit setting hormone to prevent blossom drop; however, nothing can be done to prevent a tomato plant from dropping flowers when daytime temperatures exceed 92°F.

Norris has yet to have a bad crop of tomatoes, because he chooses varieties that have the ability to set fruit in hot weather, the most critical factor for ensuring a good harvest. Most heirloom varieties do not have this ability, which is why success with fruit set may be spotty.

Norris has had success with varieties such as Big Beef, Burpee 4th of July and Park's Whopper. Local nurseries and garden centers also carry tomatoes successful in our area, such as Better Boy, Early Girl and Ace. Norris also mentioned that he only chooses tomato varieties with the acronyms VFNT or at least VFN in the name. This is because tomatoes are susceptible to verticillium and fusarium wilt, nematodes and the tobacco mosaic virus. Varieties with the mentioned acronyms are resistant to these problems.

None of Robert Norris' work is University researched material, it's simply information he has learned over his lifetime. He noted that it would be difficult for him to remember past gardening experience without the reference of his garden journal.

It's easy to get stuck on a certain variety, for example my favorite, the heirloom tomato Brandywine. It tastes like it has been salted and is extremely juicy. Unfortunately, in

certain years I have limited success in getting fruit set. So although I haven't given up on Brandywine, I plant plenty of other varieties to ensure my summer garden is complete.