

NEWS RELEASE

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Growing Tomatoes in Your Garden

Spring is here-it's time to start a vegetable patch. Even gardeners with small yards can find space for a few tomato plants. Right now, local nurseries and garden centers have numerous tomato varieties from which to choose.

Tomatoes are classified into three fruiting periods: early, mid and late. To guarantee an abundance of tomatoes throughout the summer, choose a few varieties from each category. Early tomatoes such as 'Early Girl' and the cherry tomato 'Sun Gold' begin producing fruit after only 55-60 days. Mid season tomatoes such as 'Green Zebra' and 'Roma' produce after 70 days, and late season tomatoes like 'Brandywine' and 'Mortgage Lifter' can take anywhere from 80-100 days.

Before planting, add compost to the plot and dig it into the soil. Plant tomato transplants at soil level, or bury leggy transplants until only 3 or 4 leaves are showing. After planting, add a 3-4" layer of mulch around the plant.

Tomato plants will not require fertilizer until flowers and fruit begin to set. Use a fertilizer low in nitrogen, as too much of this element can cause lush green growth instead of tomato fruit production.

Tomato plants have deep roots, so construct a basin around the plant to hold water. Using a hose, let water fill the basin and drain several times. For a large planting of tomatoes, drip irrigation on each plant can save watering time. Check soil moisture by digging at least one foot into the ground with a shovel.

Ensuring tomatoes receive sufficient moisture is important, however, it is also important to note that a tomato plant can be over-watered, resulting in lush green growth with no tomatoes. Allow plants to dry out somewhat between watering, as roots need to receive oxygen as well as water to grow.

Many pests will be attracted to your garden. Control tomato hornworms and other caterpillars with products containing Bt. Insecticidal oils can help in controlling whitefly, aphids and other soft bodied insects on contact. Insecticidal soaps are also helpful in controlling insect pests. Read labels carefully, and make sure the product targets the specific insect pests in your garden. Use caution with insecticidal oils and soaps, as applying it when temperatures are over 80° can cause leaf burn.

Visit your garden on a daily basis to check for pests. In small gardens, prepare a jar of soapy warm water, hold it under each plant and carefully knock pests such as stinkbugs and hornworms into the mixture.

In Stanislaus County, a microscopic insect known as a root knot nematode can be found in our soil. If tomato plants look unhealthy and do not set fruit, it is possible they have been attacked by this pest. Pulling out the plant will reveal a gnarled and knotted root system. This pest can cause serious problems for many types of vegetables. For more information on nematodes and other pests and diseases, see the UC Integrated Pest Management Guideline at <http://ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/selectnewpest.tomatoes.html>.

While home gardeners anxiously await their first tomatoes, other problems along the way may prevent blossom set or ruin the fruit while it's on the vine.

When a blossom fails to set (drops off the plant), this is often the result of temperature fluctuations (above 100°F and below 60°F). When temperatures are low, using a hormone spray can help blossoms set fruit, however, using this same spray during hot temperatures is not effective.

If tomatoes have a water-soaked spot on the end of the fruit that becomes sunken, the plant may have “blossom end rot”. This problem can be caused irregular watering. If fruit has blossom end rot with normal watering patterns, the issue may result from a calcium deficiency. Adding calcium containing fertilizers while tomatoes are growing may be necessary.

Cracks and “Catfacing” (a word used to describe disfigured tomatoes) appear when fluctuations in nighttime temperatures occur, or if the tomato was watered inconsistently.

A tomato plant that is well-cared for and watered correctly will be resistant to pests and diseases, as well as better able to withstand Central Valley summer temperatures.

Tomatoes are known for their high vitamin ‘C’ content, but contain vitamin ‘A’ as well as potassium and iron. Use this healthy fruit in sauces, salsa and salads. The abundance of varieties that come in red, pink, yellow, orange and green will make them a colorful addition to both your palate and dinner plate.