

Growing Great Tomatoes in the Owens Valley

By Inyo-Mono Master Gardener Carolyn Lynch

Owens Valley offers ideal summer weather for growing delicious tomatoes, but our high desert climate brings challenges including temperature extremes, wind, low soil fertility, and a relatively short growing season. To produce great tomatoes here, plants need to start strong. Master Gardeners offer these suggestions, drawn from experiences in our own gardens and in the Sunrise research garden in Bishop

*Know your soil. A soil test can help you choose appropriate amendments to apply before planting; contact us for a list of soil test labs. Local soils are low in organic matter and will benefit from generous additions of compost and other organic amendments. Manure, leaves, etc, are best added in autumn so they can break down in your soil during the winter. For best production, fertilize tomato plants monthly once fruit begins to set.

*Choose early varieties. Check estimated days from transplant to harvest ("days") provided with seeds or plants. 70 or fewer days is considered early; 60 or fewer, very early. A few early plants can extend your harvest season by a month or more while you wait for the big heirlooms to mature. Note: for Owens Valley, "days" estimates are optimistic and should be used to compare varieties, rather than accepted as accurate predictions.

*Plant large, actively growing seedlings. When shopping for plants, choose sturdy, bright green ones with roots that haven't begun to circle inside or grow outside their pots.

*Growing tomatoes from seed is not difficult but does require a commitment of time and space. Seeds should be started in mid-March for transplanting to the garden when the weather and soil warm in May. It is very important to give seedlings adequate warmth and strong light and to transplant them into larger containers as they grow. If you are able to care for plants in large (at least 1 gallon) containers as the outdoor growing season approaches, seeds may be started several weeks earlier. However, planting too early is counterproductive! Plants that grow too large for their pots become rootbound, stop growing, and lack vigor when transplanted into the garden.

*Be sure your garden soil is warm enough before setting plants out. Use a soil or compost thermometer to check that soil at the root zone (6" deep) is at least 60 degrees F. Tomatoes planted in cooler soil will stop growing until it warms, and soil-borne disease can be a threat. If seedlings grow too large for their containers, transplant them into larger pots and keep them in a sunny place, protected from freezing, where they can continue to grow until your garden soil warms. You can hasten warming with soil heating cables, by laying clear plastic sheeting over soil (remove before planting), or by placing Wall-O-Waters where plants will be grown.

*Protect transplants from wind and freezing temperatures. Young stems are somewhat brittle and benefit from staking. In Bishop, plants need frost protection until at least the end of May. Wall-O-Waters are recommended; they protect plants from both freezing and wind, last for many years, and are well worth the investment.

*Don't over-water! Roots need oxygen, and when soil is saturated they can't get it. We found that tomatoes growing in wet soil produced fruit that ripened very slowly and had poor flavor. Newly transplanted tomatoes probably will need daily watering, but once established they may need deep watering only 2 or 3 times a week. Keep an eye on your plants. If they are not wilting, other than just a bit on hot afternoons, they are getting enough to drink. Mulching your garden helps to maintain consistent moisture and keeps weeds down, too.

*If you suspect your plants are suffering from pests or disease, take action immediately! For help, consult the University of California Integrated Pest Management website at www.ipm.ucdavis.edu.

*For much more information about tomato culture, see UCANR publication 8159, [Growing Tomatoes in the Home Garden](#).

*Questions? To talk to an Inyo-Mono Master Gardener, call 760-872-2098