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ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
Tips for growing great tomatoes



Heirloom tomatoes ripen on a vine at Kendall-Jackson Wine Estate and Garden in Santa Rosa
Alvin A.H. Jornada, The Press Democrat 2015

Question: I love homegrown tomatoes and I want to grow as many as possible all summer long. How do I make that happen?

Answer: Tomato starts have been available in stores and farmers markets since late March. If you're like many Sonoma County gardeners, impatient for summertime treasures, you couldn't wait to put those precious starts in the ground.

For ideal growing conditions, the best time to plant tomatoes is when the air temperature at night is 50°F or more and the soil temperature at two to three inches deep is 60° F. Both those conditions are typically met by mid-May in Sonoma County.

Stakes or cages lift plants off the ground, make them less susceptible to disease and keep the fruit clean. To lessen root damage, stake your plants or put cages around them shortly after planting.

You may prune each plant to have two or more main stems; too many can block sunlight to the interior. By allowing more sunlight and air into the interior you help reduce plant disorders. Unpruned plants bear fruit, but pruning significantly improves both yield and fruit size.

Refer to the label on your tomato plant to find out if your plants are determinate, indeterminate, semi-determinate or dwarf. That information helps you understand when plants produce and how to support and prune your plants.

Determinate tomato plants are for early tomatoes and are usually short and stocky, growing to a maximum height of 5 feet. They grow well in containers and often don't need stakes or a cage. Their fruit ripens early and they stop producing within a few weeks. Since the last blossoms set at the top of the plant, only prune determinate tomatoes between the ground and the first branch. Pruning the top branches on determinate tomato plants stops growth and limits fruit production.

Indeterminate tomato plants, sometimes called vine tomatoes, grow tall — 6 to 12 feet — and set fruit all summer, until they die from frost or disease. Indeterminate plants need the hefty support of 6-foot tall stakes. As the plants grow, use rags or twine to loosely tie them to a stake every 12 inches. Prune them to maximize fruit production. Also, pinch off suckers that grow at a 45° angle from the point where the main branch attaches to the main stem.

Semi-determinate plants tend to be shorter and more compact than indeterminate plants — 3 to 5 feet — but they still need support and pruning. Dwarf plants are the shortest, growing to one to three feet in height. That makes them ideal for patio containers. Both semi-determinate and dwarf plants have long growing seasons.

For the highest yields, add mulch around the plants three to four inches from the stem. A 2- to 3-inch layer of organic material such as compost or rice straw helps suppress weeds and retain soil moisture.

Care and feeding

To flourish tomato plants need regular irrigation — about one inch per week — during the growing season. Plants in containers may need more frequent watering. Avoid overhead watering and keep foliage dry to prevent fungal diseases. Keep the soil around new plants moist, but not soggy, for the first three to four weeks.

When tiny tomatoes start appearing, water less to minimize further vegetative plant growth. Water established plants when the top two to three inches of the soil is dry. Consistent watering helps prevent cracking and blossom end rot. You can test soil moisture by poking your finger or a chopstick into the ground.

It's tempting to fertilize tomato plants right away to encourage growth. But fertilizing too early or with high-nitrogen fertilizer promotes more leafy growth and may actually delay fruit set. Feeding them too much nitrogen can also attract aphids and whiteflies. Wait until fruit starts to develop, then fertilize with fish emulsion, kelp or another natural fertilizer. Then apply additional fertilizer every month.

Tomatoes set fruit only when night temperatures are above 55° F. Lycopene, the pigment that gives tomatoes their red color, is only produced with temperatures between 50° F and 85° F. If the weather is extremely hot, you might pick tomatoes before they are completely ripe and bring them out of direct sunlight to ripen. They only need warmth, not light, to ripen.

Tomatoes are ripe when they give slightly when squeezed lightly. You can easily pull a ripe tomato off the vine. A soft tomato is too ripe for slicing, but you can add it to sauces. Store tomatoes in a cool place, as close to 60° F as possible. Storing tomatoes in the refrigerator reduces their flavor and turns them mushy.

Contributors to this week's column were Karen Felker and Patricia Decker. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County, <https://sonomamg.ucanr.edu>, provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707 565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.