

Tomato Growing Hints!

DON'T PLANT TOO EARLY

With our cool weather, the soil probably doesn't warm up as much as tomatoes like until early June. According to Ed Smith in VEGETABLE GARDENERS BIBLE (on the shelf in the shed), the soil should be at least 55-60 degrees and night temps shouldn't go below 45 degrees unless the plants are protected. If plants are small enough, the milk jugs in the shed can be inverted over the plants to give some protection. All the books say that the later planted tomatoes always catch up with the earlier planted ones.

Look for plants that are in a 4 inch pot or larger. If the plants are just in a small flat with small cells, the roots are often pot-bound and the plant suffers more transplant shock. If you have already purchased small plants and aren't ready to put them in the ground, transplant them into small pots at home and give the roots a chance to grow a bit before putting in the ground.

If you grow your own seedlings, keep on potting them up. If you have a supply of big yogurt cartons or similar containers, they make great pots. Punch holes in the bottom, put some soil in the bottom, then your transplant even if the soil level of the transplant is way below the top. Pinch off the leaves that will be buried. Fill with soil and leave just 3 or 4 inches of leaves sticking out. You'll get a nice root ball started in the next two weeks. Early June is usually a good planting time around here.

DON'T PLANT TOO CLOSELY

To avoid problems with diseases, space your plants appropriately for the variety. Tomatoes are either a DETERMINATE or INDETERMINATE variety. It should indicate on the plant label or you can look up that variety in a seed catalog to see which type you have. Or go to an online version of any catalog.

DETERMINATE are bush types that do not grow so large and do not need pruning except to keep the lower leaves off the ground. The fruit ripens within a concentrated time period. The plants can be grown with or without support, although you may want a wooden stake to tie the plant to in our windy location. They can be planted a little closer together -- 18 to 24 inches apart in both directions.

INDETERMINATE are vine or climbing types that should be caged or supported and pruned by removing the extra suckers a bit later in the season. The fruits ripen over an extended season and the vine continues to grow. These types need a little more space between plants unless well supported or caged. Plant at least 2 feet apart. Tomato cages are not necessary. If you do use cages, sink them securely into the ground and secure the cage with a stake driven into the soil -- otherwise the cages tend to tip over. You can use other wire supports such as reinforcing wire bent in a circle -- just be sure the holes are big enough to get your hand through easily for picking and allow plenty of space for the branches to emerge. Look for holes of 6 inches in each direction. You can also use wooden stakes on either side of the plant and support the vines with soft twine, torn cloth, or nylon stockings.

PLANTING HINTS

If your tomato plant is too tall, it can be planted deeper in the soil than in its pot. Roots will develop all along the buried stem. Or you can tip the plant on its side and gently bend the top of the plant above the soil. Keep at least 4 inches of stem above ground. Tomatoes like a rich soil so some composted cow manure in the hole works well. Mix it into the soil before setting your plant. Fedco Seeds recommends adding some crushed egg shells in the hole to give the plant extra calcium. The kelp fertilizer in the shed is a good liquid fertilizer to use on the leaves in the early part of the season. Follow the mixing directions -- just a few tablespoons in a watering can full of water is the right amount. You can use every 2 or 3 weeks until the plant is well established. Once the soil has really warmed up, some mulch around the base of the plants helps keep the fruit clean and prevents any soil diseases from splashing on the lower leaves. Keep the lower leaves well pruned so they don't touch the ground. Water around the base of the plant and not directly on the leaves. The mulch will help keep soil moisture even which helps prevent cracking of the skin.

PRUNING & WATERING

Caging without pruning delays ripening, reduces fruit size, but increases production, prevents sunburn, and reduces cracking and rotting. Pruning both types of plants to remove leaves below the first flower cluster reduces the chance of soil-borne diseases splashing onto the plant after rain or watering. Water the SOIL around the plant and not the leaves -- moisture on the leaves promotes fungal growth.

Hopefully these hints will help give you a luscious crop of tomatoes!