

GROWING TOMATOES

Tomatoes are warm season plants that should be planted outdoors after all danger of frost has passed which is usually about May 25th in this area. Start seeds indoor 6 to 8 weeks before the planting date or purchase transplants from local stores. Seeds planted directly outdoors will not mature quickly enough to produce fruit.

Tomatoes need a well-drained soil and full sun to encourage high yield and minimal diseases. Before planting, mix in 4 cups of a 5-20-20 fertilizer per 100 square feet of surface. Fertilize again when fruit begins to form by sprinkling high nitrogen fertilizer 4 inches from each plant.

Protect young plants from cutworms by wrapping the stem with paper and burying it about an inch into the soil. Tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant are prone to several serious disease problems. Select disease resistant varieties whenever possible.

Determinate tomatoes are self-topping bush types, generally growing to a height of 3 feet or less. Indeterminate varieties are tall and constantly growing. These will require staking or caging. Recommended tomato varieties for this area include: New Yorker, Spring set, Jetstar, Pik-Red, Jackpot, Roma Flor America, and Sunray. Cherry tomato suggested varieties include Large Red Cherry and Small Fry.

Tomatoes can be staked, caged, or allowed to spread over the ground as they grow. Staking or caging tomatoes exposes the plant to maximum sunlight and provides for better fruit since fruit that lies on the ground is susceptible to soil rot. For staking, use sturdy 5 to 6 foot-long stakes driven into the soil near the base of the plant. When the vines are 12 to 15 inches long, remove all but the 1 or 2 main stems and tie these loosely to the stake using soft string or rags, taking care not to draw the stem too tightly to the stake. For caging, any type of mesh wire or fencing that does not prevent one from reaching the fruit can be used. A cage should be 18 to 24 inches in diameter and 3 to 5 feet high. Make sure it is sturdy enough to support a full size plant without tipping over.

The **Master Gardener Hotline** is open from April to October, Monday through Friday. Lines are available 9:00 am to noon and 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm at 888-678-3464

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