

Tips for growing terrific tomatoes

By Steve Gibson

Tomato connoisseurs will agree that tomatoes purchased out-of-season from the grocery store simply don't meet their expectations. Though these fruit are often smooth-skinned and quite attractive, they're often described as tasting "like cardboard".

These tomatoes varieties are bred for a firmer texture and extended shelf life.

They ship and slice well, but sacrifice in terms of juiciness and flavor.

Thus, the tomato connoisseur longingly awaits spring, which will provide him or her yet another opportunity to place tomato plants lovingly into the warm earth in anticipation of that first "real" tomato that is sure to make their taste buds dance.

Tomatoes are relatively easy to grow, and are as well-suited to the backyard enthusiast as they are to the serious vegetable gardener.

Much success in growing tomatoes can be attributed to use of a few proven techniques.

Choosing a variety that has proven to be a true performer should be at the top of every gardener's list.

Better Boy, Whopper,

Celebrity, and Mountain Pride are among some of the best selections.

Better Boy, Celebrity, and Whopper are VFN, which means they carry resistance to verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt, and root-knot nematodes. It is best to experiment with several varieties in order to find the ideal tomato for your taste buds.

Use the best soil available to grow the tomato crop.

Clay soils can be improved by working in two to three inches of compost, peatmoss, or other forms of organic matter in the top six to nine inches of soil.

Lime and fertilizer should be added according to soil test recommendations. If no soil test has been taken, apply 3/4 cup of lime and 1/2 cup of 8-8-8 fertilizer for each plant.

Lime will help reduce nutrient imbalances, particularly with calcium and help control the blossom end rot problem that occurs so frequently on tomatoes.

Tomato plants should be spaced 1 1/2 to two feet apart in the row and three to four feet between rows.

The planting hole should be deep enough to allow the top of a peat pot to be covered with

one inch of soil.

If peat pot is exposed to the air, it will act like a wick and rapidly dry out the root ball, causing stunting or death of the plant.

If the transplant is tall and leggy at time of planting, the trench planting method should be used.

To trench plant a tomato plant, dig a horizontal trench rather than a hole for each plant.

Next, remove all of the leaves from the plant except the top leaf cluster (four to five leaves).

Then lay the plant on its side in the trench and cover the root system and bare stem up to the top leaf cluster with two to three inches of soil. Firm the soil over the plant.

Be sure not to press the soil too firmly around the stem where it comes out of the soil, as the stem may break.

A starter solution should be used at planting time to insure proper fertilization during the early growth stages of young plants.

Starter solutions can be purchased from local garden centers or made at home.

To make a starter solution, mix one pound of a complete fertilizer such as 8-8-8 in 10 gal of water.

If small quantities are desired, three to four Tbsp. of fertilizer can be mixed per gal of water. The high phosphorus content in commercial starter solutions make them the preferred choice over home mixes. Never use more than one cup of fertilizer solution per transplant.

Large quantities of starter solution will burn the root system.

Tomato plants should be staked or caged shortly after planting.

Generally, staking produces larger tomatoes but less quantity than caging.

A common six-ft. tomato stake may be purchased from many garden centers.

The stake should be driven in the soil about one foot deep, three to five inches from the plant.

Be sure to avoid driving the stake on the root side of plants that have been trench planted.

Trench planted tomatoes should be staked immediately after planting while the location of the buried stem is fresh in mind. Use a strip of cloth, nylon stocking, or heavy string to tie the plant to the stake.

Tomato cages may be made by using a 5 1/2 foot length of concrete reinforcing wire or pasture wire.

The wire will form a circle 18 to 20 inches in diameter.

The bottom horizontal ring of the wire cage should be cut off so that the ends can be pushed into the ground.

After setting the cage in place over the tomato plant, drive two or three stakes around the outside edge of the cage to give it extra support.

Sidedress tomato plants with 2 to 3 Tablespoons per plant of a complete fertilizer such as 8-8-8 or 10-10-10 after the plants have started to set fruit and four to six weeks thereafter throughout the growing season.

Keep the sidedressing material four to six inches from the plant's stem to avoid fertilizer burn.

It is important to make sure the tomatoes receive sufficient water during the season. The soil should be soaked six to eight inches deep at 7-day intervals.

Mulches such as wheat straw or composted leaves around the tomato plants will prove to be a real asset in conserving soil moisture during July and August.

Finally, have a prepared plan for dealing with the various insect and disease problems.

Frequent observation of tomato plants for pest damage is the only way to stay ahead of the game. Contact the County Extension Center at 704-482-4365 if you need advice on pesticide recommendations.

(Gibson is an agent with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension's Cleveland County office.)

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2x6	4.50	5x15	5.75	7x25	7.25	9x35	9.35
2x8	5.65	7x05	8.65	9x87	9.87	12x20	12.20
2x10	6.15	7x49	11.99	13x99	13.99	15x99	15.99
2x12	9.99	12x49	14.98	17x49	17.49	19x98	19.98
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1x6	3.40	4x30	5.16				
5/4x6	3.30	4x05	5.15	5x60	5.60	6x60	6.60
2x2	1.69	2x19	2.59	3x09	3.09	3x39	3.39
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2x6	3.26	12'	14'
2x8	3.99	18'	24'
2x10	4.49	24'	30'
1x2	1.07	36'	42'
1x4	1.69	48'	54'
1x6	3.29	60'	66'
1x8	4.29	72'	78'
1x12	7.60	84'	90'
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OAK LUMBER ROUGH CUT		
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4x6	45	DO NOT CARRY (DO NOT CARRY) DO NOT CARRY
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