

HOME & GARDEN

Tomato time comes with infinite variety

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The tomato is probably the most popular vegetable in the whole United States. This succulent, flavorful red fruit is so much in demand that we will even accept the orange cardboard imitations that appear in the supermarkets during the winter. However, this is harder to tolerate once you have known the pleasure of a sun-warmed tomato eaten out of hand while strolling through the August garden.

Tomatoes come in many varieties, and it would take a whole column just to describe the tomato in all its diversity. There are red tomatoes that mature early, late or in mid-season. There are hearty beefsteak tomatoes and yellow tomatoes. There are paste tomatoes that make incomparable sauces and cherry tomatoes that will grow in the garden or in containers. There are tomatoes that have a resistance to verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt and to nematodes and root knot problems. There are tomatoes that have an indeterminate growth habit, which means they will keep on growing and growing and definitely need staking. There are brush or determinate tomatoes that produce a terminal leader that develops a flower bud at the top of its growth.

Now the only way to take advantage of this diversity is to start your own plants from seed because most nurseries will only offer a very limited selection.

It is not difficult to start tomatoes from seed. I usually start mine in mid-March, which is 10 weeks or so before Memorial Day — the date I plan on setting my hardened off seedlings in the garden. The object is not to grow very large plants but a transplant that will be sturdy, with a vigorous root system.

I start by preparing my flats, filling them

with damp jiffy-mix, a soil-less seed medium. I plant the seeds by laying them ¼- to ½-inch apart on top of the "soil" and covering them with another ¼-inch of jiffy-mix. I pat and firm the surface and water it by spraying with my plastic spray bottle. This gentle watering does not disturb the surface or wash the seeds around.

The flat does not have to go in the window or under lights immediately. Placing the flat where the temperature will be as even as possible and at least 65 degrees will guarantee good germination.

In just a few days, when the seedlings are up, they should be put where they will get the sun or set out under grow lights. Remember, even with the advantage of grow lights, the seedlings must have at least eight hours of dark. Growing is as exhausting for a seedling as it is for an infant.

Keep the soil moist but not wet, and do not use cold water. Seedlings do not need to be fertilized right away. I prefer to wait until they have been transplanted, and then I use a dilute solution of fish emulsion — my favorite indoor fertilizer.

After the seedlings have put out their second set of leaves it is time to transplant them into individual containers. Peat pots or styrofoam cups can be used.

I put in an amount of the same potting mix I used in the flat and gently dig the seedling up. This infant plant is very tender so I hold it by the leaves or stem as gently as possible and set it into the cup. Then I fill the cup with more potting soil, burying most of the stem. Tomatoes have the ability to put out new roots wherever the stem is covered with soil.

BETWEEN THE ROWS

In order to develop a really strong and extensive root system on his tomatoes, Dick Raymond, an eminent Vermont gardener, transplants his tomatoes a second time when they are 6 to 10 inches tall. This time he moves them into a half-gallon cardboard milk carton, again planting the stems deeply so that more roots will grow.

Sometimes tomato seedlings can become leggy, that is the stems become long and spindly. This can be caused by too much fertilizer, growing them too far away from a light source or growing them in a room that is too warm. If this happens, it can be compensated for by planting the seedlings deeply when they are set out into the garden.

Before going outside, though, the seedlings must be hardened off. First gradually decrease the watering given the plants. This will start to toughen them up. Then move them outdoors gradually.

A cold frame is the perfect place to harden plants off because it will protect the tender seedlings from the direct onslaught of sun and wind. Lacking a cold frame, seedlings can be set outdoors in a sheltered spot for longer periods every day and then brought in at night. Each day they should get a little more sun and breeze until in about two weeks they are hardy enough to set into the garden.

The garden should be prepared by digging compost and maybe some rotted manure into the soil. Then I trench-plant my seedlings. I dig a little trench, about 8 inches deep and as long as my plant is tall. I put in a little extra compost and fertilizer and cover with some soil. This will provide the tomato with extra nourishment when the roots grow to that

depth. Then I take my well-watered seedling and lay it on its side, burying all the stem except the topmost leaves. (I also put in the stake at this point while I am sure where the stem and roots are.) Plants should be spaced about 18 inches apart and watered well. All this is done on a cloudy day, or late in the afternoon when the sun is no longer strong.

Here in Heath it never gets very hot and tomatoes do love heat. So to take advantage of what sun and warmth there is, I mulch the tomatoes with black plastic. This not only conserves moisture and keeps down weeds, it also absorbs the warmth that will help the fruits ripen before the frosts descend.

Well-started seedlings that have been transplanted with care should thrive in the garden, needing only to be pruned by pinching out the suckers that will appear right above a leaf branch. This will help direct the strength of the plant into the main shoot and fruits.

Tomatoes are not difficult to grow, and there is nothing to compare with the taste of a freshly harvested ripe tomato. The most difficult task may be deciding between Big Boy, Better Boy, Wonder Boy, Marglobe, Pixie, Long-keeper and Roma.

Another sign of spring is in the air: it is time for the annual Small Farms Conference, which will be held at the Franklin County Technical School on March 27. Over 30 workshops will be held on topics ranging from beekeeping to fencing to poultry to raspberries. Programs and pre-registration forms for the all-day conference are available at the Franklin County Extension Service, Court House, Greenfield, or call 774-2902 for information. I found last year's program great fun and extremely helpful and informative so I hope I will see a lot of avid and novice gardeners on hand this year.



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