

The Tomato Race Is On!
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If those tomato plants aren't in the ground yet, the coveted award of the first ripe tomato in the neighborhood is probably out of reach. But it's still worth the effort to get those tomatoes planted. Grocery store tomatoes cannot compete in taste with those that are home-grown. Another plus is food safety. Last year when people were afraid to eat salsa or tomatoes due to the salmonella scare, home gardeners didn't miss a beat.

There's no doubt that among vegetable gardening circles, tomatoes are the #1 crop. Check out any gardening catalogue and browse the tomato varieties...the choices are mind boggling. For now, skip the catalogues because it's important to plant now to beat the heat. Local garden centers have tomato transplants so shop for healthy looking plants that are disease resistant.



To get started, select an area that gets at least six hours of direct sun, preferably morning sun. If you don't have a garden area, consider planting in an existing landscape bed or in a container. Tomatoes benefit from lots of organic matter so if the soil is sandy, purchase compost or another organic amendment and mix this in the planting hole. When preparing the soil, mix in 3 pounds of a 6-6-6 or 2 pounds of 8-10-10 fertilizer per 100 square feet. Soil pH should be between 5.8 and 6.3 so take a pint of soil to your local County Extension Office for testing. Don't add lime if the soil has not been tested first.

Space plants three to four feet apart and place a six foot wooden stake three inches from the tomato when planting. Use a non-abrasive tie (fabric, panty hose) to attach the plant to the stake just below the fruit clusters. Wire cages can also be used and purchased from local garden centers or can be made by wrapping a five foot length of wire mesh around each plant. Just make sure holes are large enough so you can harvest easily. For large fruiting varieties, six inch squares are preferred. Add wire anchors at the base of the cage, or weave pipe or PVC through the cage and push into the ground to hold the cage steady.

Water and fertilizer are the next critical steps. Water immediately and then on a regular basis until plants are established. At the first watering, use a liquid fertilizer solution (i.e. 20-20-20) and reapply two more times at 2-week intervals. Every three to four weeks, sidedress each ten foot row with 5 ounces of 6-6-6 or 4 ounces of 8-10-10 by placing fertilizer just beyond the outside leaves. To reduce constant fertilizer applications, consider using a controlled release fertilizer like Osmocote.

As tomatoes are growing, some people sucker their plants by removing the small shoots that develop between the leaf and plant stem. Remove all suckers below the first flower cluster. This is more important on indeterminate varieties that continue to grow versus determinate varieties (reach a set height). Suckering tomatoes will create larger but fewer fruit. Leave suckers that develop above the fruit as they help prevent sunscald by shading fruit.

Scout plants frequently to monitor for problems. Most pest problems can be controlled with soaps or Dipel (caterpillars). Avoid disease problems by rotating the planting location of tomatoes, peppers, tomatoes, and eggplants (Solanaceae family) with nonrelated vegetables like legumes and cucurbits (squash, cucumbers). Reduce disease problems by watering the roots – not the foliage, pull weeds as soon as they pop up, and prune to remove diseased leaves. Wooden stakes harbor diseases so new stakes should be purchased each year. Wire cages can be sterilized using a 1:10 bleach to water solution.

Check out plant tags to find out more information about a specific variety. Look for the designations V (verticillium wilt), F or FF (fusarium wilt), N (nematodes), T (tobacco mosaic virus), S (grey leaf spot), TSWV (tomato spotted wilt virus), and A (alternaria stem canker). In addition, look for number of days to harvest (DTH) and the terms determinate and indeterminate. Determinate types (D) grow to a certain height and then stop. Indeterminate types (I) continue to grow and bear fruit over a longer period of time.

Here's a list of some of the proven favorites for Florida.

- Large Fruit: Celebrity, Heat Wave II, Better Boy, Beefmaster, BNH444-Southern Star, Amelia, BNH640.
- Small Fruit: Sweet 100, Juliet, Red Grape, Sun Gold, Sugar Snack, Sweet Baby Girl
- Heirloom: Green Zebra, Cherokee Purple, Eva Purple Ball, Brandywine, Mortgage Lifter, Delicious.