

Growing Tomatoes



Many different types of tomatoes are available to the home gardener. Tomato fruit may be red, yellow, orange, or pink in color and round, slightly flattened, globe, or pear-like in shape. Some varieties have the potential to develop large fruit under favorable growing conditions; other varieties such as the small cherry type, develop only small size fruit because of genetic control of fruit size. Gardeners interested in the salad or novelty type tomatoes may elect to grow the small and large red cherry types or the red and yellow pear or plum types. Those gardeners interested in growing large fruited types of tomatoes might select varieties such as Big Boy or Wonder Boy. Recommended yellow fruited varieties include Golden Jubilee or Sunray. Pinkshipper is a recommended pink fruited variety suggested for planting in Ohio gardens. Other desirable varieties include Caravelle, Moreton Hybrid, Fantastic, Marglobe, Heinz 1350, Heinz 1439, Rutgers, and Campbell 1327. Plant breeders and seed companies have continuous programs to develop new varieties, so new varieties become available periodically.

Establishing Plants in the Home Garden

As it requires considerable effort to provide environment for growing high quality tomato plants from seed, it is suggested the tomato plants be established in the garden from plants obtained from plant growing specialists or the local garden supply center. This is particularly true when only a small number of plants are required.

Top quality tomato plants for transplanting into the garden are green in color, about 8-10 inches tall, with straight, sturdy stems about the size of a lead pencil. The plants have a healthy extensive root system and large fully expanded leaves. The plants should be free of insects and disease and not yet in bloom. Plants available in individual pots can be transplanted with the least amount of transplant shock and will become more quickly established than those plants where the root system is disturbed in the planting operation.

Soil Requirements

Tomatoes can be grown on many different soil types but a deep, loamy soil, well drained and well supplied with organic matter and plant nutrients is most suitable. The crop will grow best in a slightly acid soil, pH 6.2-6.8.

Fertilizer

Tomatoes respond well to applications of fertilizer, but excessive applications can be injurious to plants. Excessive nitrogen fertilizer application, for example, tends to result in plants with large stems and leaves but producing few tomatoes. A good general rule is to apply 3-4 pounds of a complete fertilizer such as 5-10-5, 6-12-12 or 8-16-16 per 100 square feet of garden space. Work the fertilizer well into the soil. Extra nitrogen fertilizer may be required after the first flower clusters have set fruit. Apply the extra fertilizer around the base of the plant. If the soil is quite fertile or if manure has been applied, use nitrogen containing fertilizer sparingly in growing the crop.

Establishing the Plants

Tomatoes do not grow during periods of cool temperatures, and are highly susceptible to frost injury. Therefore, tomato plants should not be set into the garden until all danger of frost has passed. Usually in central Ohio this date is approximately May 20th.

Tomatoes to be grown as unstaked plants are usually planted 3 feet apart in rows 4 to 5 feet apart. Plants to be staked are normally planted 2 feet apart in the rows which are 3 to 4 feet apart. Unstaked plants are usually mulched with clean straw, black plastic film, or other available mulching material. In situations where space for growing tomatoes is limited, the plants may be grown on large clay pots or 5 gallon buckets as staked plants.

Set the plants so the lower leaves will be close to the soil surface. Be sure peat pots are well moistened before planting and the rim of the pot is below the soil surface. Newly set plants may be attacked by insect pests such as flea beetles and a spraying or dusting program to control insects and diseases should be started soon after planting.

A completely soluble starter fertilizer can be applied at planting time. Select an analysis high in phosphorus and use according to manufacturer's direction.

Caring for Tomato Plants

After planting and establishment of tomato plants, use a mulch around the plants to conserve soil moisture. The plants can be staked using stakes at least 6 feet long. The plants are pruned to either a single or double stem and periodically tied to the stake with soft string.

Apply sufficient water to get the plants quickly established following planting. However, be careful not to apply too much water to the soil during the growing season or excessive growth or root decay may occur. Follow a regular insect and disease control program.

Source: OSU Ext.