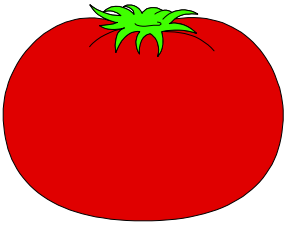


The Tomato



Over our long northeast winters, gardeners spend hours planning and dreaming of their vegetable gardens. And, no garden dream is complete without visions of juicy, red ripe tomatoes.

The tomato belongs to the enormous Nightshade family, Solanaceae, which includes potatoes, eggplants, peppers, tobacco and tomatillos. An excellent source of vitamins A and C, tomatoes are #1 when it comes to popularity and the plant most widely grown by home gardeners. Varieties are either determinate or indeterminate. Determinate plants will grow to a set or determined height and produce a set amount of tomatoes. An indeterminate variety has no limits and grows throughout the season. If you have limited space, try a few plants of a determinate variety or raise a plant or two in containers. Tomato plants require a minimum of eight hours of full sun each day and cannot tolerate frost.

Growing tomatoes in the northeast requires that we either start tomatoes from seed indoors or purchase transplants. Seeds should be started six to eight weeks before the average last frost date. Transplant seedlings to larger pots once they have developed four leaves, and plant seedlings deeper each time you transplant to increase root development and strengthen the stem.

Before planting outdoors, seedlings must be “hardened off” or gradually introduced to the harsher conditions outdoors. When purchasing tomato transplants, look for short, stocky plants with thick stems and dark green foliage. Avoid plants with blossoms since early flowering usually indicates that the plant is under stress. Plant tomatoes in a sunny, well-drained area with a slightly acid soil pH of 6.0 to 6.5.

Work some dehydrated manure, compost or a slow acting general purpose organic fertilizer into the hole or trench before planting and give them another light feeding when the plants set flowers. Avoid heavy nitrogen fertilizers which produce lots of foliage and few blossoms. Tomatoes are heavy feeders and will appreciate a side dressing or foliar feedings a few times throughout the season.

Tomato plants can either be trench planted or set in the ground vertically. Trenching is preferable when planting leggy seedlings. First, pinch off lower leaves and lay the plant horizontally in a shallow trench. Cover the stem with two to three inches of soil leaving the top cluster of leaves above the surface. Trench planting encourages root development along the buried stem getting plants off to a quicker start by increasing water and nutrient intake. Also, with its roots only a few inches below the surface of the soil, heat-loving tomato plants receive more warmth earlier in the day lengthening the plant’s growing time. Stake trenched tomatoes at planting time to avoid damaging any roots later in the season.

If planting tomatoes vertically, remove some lower leaves and plant seedlings deeply to increase root development along the buried stem. The main advantage of deep, vertical planting comes when the weather gets hot and dry and roots are closer to moisture deep in the soil. Add organic matter to each planting hole to increase the moisture-holding capacity of the soil and to help roots expand easily.

Apply a thick layer of organic mulch three to four weeks after planting to help conserve moisture, block weeds and protect low-growing tomatoes from resting on the ground. Do not apply organic mulch too early in the season because it will keep the soil cool and potentially delay your harvest. If you want to raise the soil temperature, place black plastic on the ground early in the season to absorb heat.

Staking tomato plants saves space, keeps fruit off the ground and makes harvesting easier. Staking also means pruning and a greater investment of time. Pinching or pruning suckers off plants controls growth and puts more energy into fruit production.

Tomatoes need an even supply of water throughout the season and will suffer if their water supply is erratic. At least one inch of rain or irrigation water per week is required for steady growth. Water early in the day to cut down on water loss through evaporation. Wet foliage overnight can be the cause of some diseases. Also, try to apply water right at the soil surface and not on the leaves and blossoms.

Harvest tomatoes when they are firm and at peak color for the best flavor. They will not redden in temperatures above 86°F. In these conditions, pick them in the pink stage and ripen indoors at temperatures between 55 - 72°F. Tomatoes do not need light to ripen, so don't place them on a sunny windowsill. Sunlight can burn and redden them before they ripen naturally resulting in poorer flavor. Wrapping or covering unripe tomatoes with newspaper or brown grocery bags helps to trap a natural, ethylene gas emitted by tomatoes which hastens ripening.

Tomatoes cannot handle even the lightest frost. To protect your plants from a light frost, cover them with bed sheets, burlap or even big boxes. If a hard frost is predicted, pick all the tomatoes even the green ones. They will eventually ripen.

For More Information on Capital District Community Gardens' programs or to make a tax-deductible donation contact:



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