

Yard and Garden – 05-09-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Have you heard the one about the tomato grower?

For many years, an elderly gentleman had grown a large garden of tomatoes. Every year, he would have his son Vinnie till the garden, but this particular year his son Vinnie was in prison. One day, the old man wrote his son a letter.

Dear Vinnie,

As you know, I'm getting up there in age and since you are in prison, you can no longer help me till the garden. I guess this year I won't be able to grow tomatoes.

Love,

Dad

The next day, the old man received a letter from son Vinnie.

Dear Dad,

Under no circumstances should you till the garden. That is where I buried the bodies.

Love,

Vinnie.

The following day, at dawn, a number of FBI and police cars pulled up to the old man's home. A crew of men got out with shovels, and for over an hour they dug up the entire garden in search of bodies. Finding none, they apologized to the old man and left.

Later that day, the old man received another letter from his son.

Dear Dad,

Under the circumstance that was the best I could do. Enjoy the tomatoes.

Love,

Vinnie

Last Saturday morning, my good friend, a master gardener and a tomato aficionado, Mick Ross, and I presented a seminar entitled *Mick and Ted's Tomato Adventure*. I was amazed that over 100 people attended our program. Many in attendance had years of experience growing tomatoes while others had little or none. Everyone was there to learn more about growing tomatoes successfully.



Who can resist the delicious anticipation of eating a tomato freshly plucked from the vine? It should come as no surprise that the tomato is the most commonly grown vegetable in the United States.

Long ago, I learned in botany class that, scientifically speaking, the tomato is a fruit. While preparing for my part of the seminar, I discovered that the U.S Supreme Court played a major role in calling the tomato a vegetable. In 1883, Congress passed the Tariff Act, imposing a 10% tax on imported vegetables.

Based on the botanical classification, importers of tomatoes claimed them to be a fruit and not a vegetable. At that time, imported fruits were not taxed. The case went all the way to the U.S Supreme Court. As it turned out, the court ruled the tomato to be a vegetable. Interestingly, their decision was based primarily on the way the tomato was consumed. Since tomatoes are generally eaten as part of the main course similarly to that of potatoes and other veggies and since the tomato is rarely, if ever, eaten as a desert, the court ruled the tomato a vegetable. Wouldn't you know it; it's always about taxes.

Although I've been personally growing tomatoes for years, Mick's portion of the seminar presented a new growing method for me to try. Anyone who has grown tomatoes knows that sometimes success can be a challenge. Tomatoes are host to a number of fungal diseases. In our area, summers are generally hot and humid, both of which are environmental conditions that can foster disease. Many disease-causing pathogens that affect tomatoes live in the soil. When rain or other sources of water splash onto the soil and the soil splashes on the lower leaves of the tomato plant, it often carries the spores of the fungal disease, thus inoculating the plant. I've generally made it a practice to water from beneath using soaker hoses and to cover the soil around the plants with mulch, such as grass clippings. Mick suggested first putting a landscape fabric down on the soil cutting a small opening and then planting the tomato. The fabric keeps the rain from splashing soil, and pathogens on the lower leaves. One can then mulch over the fabric for added protection. This year, I'm going to plant my tomatoes as Mick suggested.

For other great tips on growing tomatoes successfully, I encourage you check out the following websites. If you don't have access to a computer, stop by the Extension Office and pick up your copies.

<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/epublic/pages/publicationD.jsp?publicationId=1029>

<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/epublic/pages/publicationD.jsp?publicationId=641>

www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM608.pdf

Now, if I could only figure out a way for this old man to get someone to till my tomato garden. Where is Vinnie when one needs him?