

Tomato Tips

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Tomatoes are the most popular garden crop grown. The minimum soil temperature for planting tomatoes is 55 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit with 65 to 80 degrees being optimum. Soil temperatures have reached the lower optimum level, so now is a great time to plant.

On average, the danger of frost is also past by now. Tomatoes are not tolerant of frost and cool temperatures or too low of soil temperature can stunt tomatoes. Stunting slows growth, delays fruiting, and can reduce fruit production. For these reasons, gardeners didn't need to be in a hurry to plant early.

Tomatoes are best planted in full sun for optimum yields. As a fruiting plant, eight or more hours of sunlight per day is needed. They are referred to as fruiting plants because the part of the plant we eat is the fruit which carries seeds.

Avoid planting tomatoes near black walnut trees to prevent walnut wilt. This is caused by the chemical juglone which is exuded by walnut roots. Affected plants are stunted, may wilt, and the lower portions of stems turn brown internally. This injury may not occur every season. To avoid it, plant tomatoes at a greater distance from the base of black walnut trees than the trees height.

Tomatoes need a fertile, well-drained soil. Amending garden soil with compost each fall or early spring increases drainage and fertility. Not working or walking on wet soils, which causes compaction, helps avoid poorly drained soils.

Some wind protection provided by slatted fencing, shrubs, or trees will enhance tomato growth and yield. It is best for the area not to be completely protected by wind as air circulation reduces leaf diseases by drying leaves quicker after rainfall or overhead irrigation.

Rotate tomatoes in the garden. They should not be planted in the same place tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant, or peppers were grown the previous year. All are susceptible to the same diseases. Planting in the same location year after year will increase disease.

Select disease resistant varieties when buying. Resistance will be designated with acronyms on seed packets and transplant tags. For example, Fusarium (F), Verticillium (V), Tomato Mosaic Virus (TMV), early blight (EB) and late blight (LB). Record varieties so you know which perform best.

Tomato plants benefit from fertilization but excess nitrogen can force plants to produce foliage at the expense of fruits. A soil test may be needed to determine soil fertility. Instructions on how to collect and submit soil for testing are available from your local UNL Extension office.

If planting in soil amended with compost each year, some or all fertilizer may be omitted at planting. If soil nutrients are low, apply 2 to 3 pounds of a complete fertilizer per 100 square feet of garden area when preparing soil.

When the first fruits are about the size of a half-dollar, scatter one teaspoon of 5-10-5 fertilizer uniformly around each plant 8 to 10 inches from the stem. Mix the fertilizer into the top one-half inch of soil and water thoroughly. Repeat this once or twice a month through the season.

Maintaining a uniformly moist soil is needed for fruit production and quality. A weekly watering that moistens soil 6 to 8 inches deep promotes deep roots and is better than frequent light waterings which promotes shallow roots.

Mulching helps reduce water loss from soil. Covering soil with mulch also eliminates rain splash of soil and fungal spores onto lower leaves, where most diseases begin. Mulch should not be more than a couple of inches deep and not against plant stems.