

Save big by growing tasty tomatoes

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Tomatoes are one of the most popular vegetables, actually it's a fruit, to eat and grow. Per pound, tomatoes can be somewhat costly to buy, so growing your own will definitely save you money and they often taste better too. By following some growing tips, you can grow great tomatoes.

The plants need at least four to six hours of sun per day. Choose how and where you will grow your tomatoes based on your growing conditions and space. Tomatoes can be grown several different ways — in the ground or in a raised bed, in containers, in a hydroponic system, and even in hanging baskets.

As a warm-season crop, tomatoes are sensitive to cold, so timing is important. There are two growing seasons for planting tomatoes in North Florida, from February to April and July to August. The key is to plant them after the danger of frost has past. With this mild winter, I planted at the end of February and had to protect them from the late freeze this week using frost cloth.

If you are planning on growing the plant in a container, you may want to grow a determinate variety, such as Patio, Floragold or Floradade. This type grows in a more compact, bush-like shape with just a single crop of tomatoes.

There are many more indeterminate varieties out there. These have large, sprawling growth habit and require pruning (removing suckers) and support, such as a trellis, cage or staking. Indeterminate varieties produce fruit over several months, allowing you to pick them throughout the season.

When it comes to selecting varieties, you may want to choose varieties resistant to common tomato diseases, such as verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt, and bacterial spot, and pests, such as nematodes. The label may show a two- or three-letter abbreviation to indicate resistance. Some recommended varieties include Better Boy, Celebrity, and Amelia, or heirloom varieties such as Cherokee Purple, Green Zebra, and Mortgage Lifter.

For growing tomatoes in the hotter months, pick a heat-tolerant cultivar like Heat Wave II, Solar Fire or Florida 91. Most cherry tomatoes can withstand the heat as well.

Tomatoes need to be planted as transplants rather than directly seeded. When you plant your tomato, plant it as deep as you can to give it extra support. Roots will develop along the stem once you put it in the soil.

Proper soil pH and regular fertilizing are important for tomato production. The best soil pH for tomatoes is between 6.2 and 6.5, so it is recommended to test your soil, especially if you are putting them in the ground. Tomatoes need calcium for proper fruit production or they can get blossom end rot. If your pH is below 6.0, you can add dolomitic limestone which will provide calcium and magnesium. If the pH is normal, you can apply gypsum.

A fertilizer should be broadcast before planting, about 4 tablespoons per plant, and then side dressed (around the drip line of the plant) every 2-3 weeks, about 2 tablespoons per plant. Fertilizers can be liquid or granular, preferably in controlled-release form to help protect the aquifer.

Tomatoes need a lot of water and prefer even moisture to prevent problems such as blossom end rot, cracking and splitting. They typically need 1 inch of water per week when young and 2 inches as they mature. Self-watering containers really help keep the moisture even.

Scout your plants for insects and diseases early and often because infestations are better managed if they are small. Plant-sucking insects and caterpillars can be major problems. Insecticidal soap and Bt, such as Dipel, often have some success. Don't apply insecticidal soap during the heat of the day.

Harvest tomatoes when they are fully ripe for the best quality. I don't refrigerate mine in order to preserve the nutrients and flavor. You can pick green or pink fruit and ripen them on a counter as well.

For more information on growing tomatoes, refer to <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh028>.