

GROWING TOMATOES

Growing tomatoes in the home garden used to be a lot easier than it is today. The primary reason for the lack of production centers around one disease or virus known as Tomato Spotted Wilt. The virus is transmitted by tiny insects called thrips and can infect tomatoes and peppers at any growth stage. Insecticides are not an effective control measure due to constant pressure of these insects.

So how do we have any success at growing tomatoes? First, I will briefly mention a few of the basics. It all starts with soil preparations. Tomatoes need a soil that is well drained and high in organic matter. The soil pH should be in the range of 6.2 to 6.8 and this is determined through a soil sample. The soil sample will also indicate soil calcium levels. Calcium is important for both tomato and pepper production for the prevention of blossom-end rot which is the number two problem I see most often in home garden tomato production. The second step is to select healthy plants. Since the spotted wilt virus is likely to be a major concern, look for varieties such as Amelia, BHN 444, and BHN 640 that have resistance to the virus. Better Boy, Bush Celebrity, Bush Early, Big Boy, Beefmaster, Early Girl, etc are all good hybrids but lack any resistance to the virus. So if one of these is selected, plant a few transplants one week and a few more a week later. This may help with consideration to thrips numbers at any given time.

Tomatoes are medium feeders of nutrients and will require a few applications of fertilizer throughout production. If you don't have a soil sample, incorporate 1.5 pounds of 10-10-10 for 100 square feet of bed prior to planting. After the first tomatoes form on the vine and are about the size of a quarter, side-dress them with 10-10-10 at the rate of 1 pound per 100 square feet of bed. Repeat every three to four weeks until harvest is completed. Soluble fertilizers also work well but caution should be used not to over-fertilize and grow more bush than fruit.

Tomatoes require about 1-2 inches of water per week depending on the type of soil they are growing in. Drip irrigation works really well and avoids getting the foliage wet which can cause disease.

Finally, what's the difference between determinate and indeterminate varieties? Determinate varieties grow more in a bush form and produce their crop at one time. With a determinate, all of the fruit can be harvested in two to five pickings. Indeterminate varieties set fruit clusters along a vine stem that continues to grow all season. They will produce fruit all season with timely harvesting.