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THIS YEAR OUR TOMATO CROP WILL BE BETTER!

by Cecile Garrison, UC Master Gardener

This year I will prepare my soil better before I plant my tomatoes, water more evenly and less often, figure out a better way to keep my tomatoes off the ground, and stay on top of the weeds and worms a lot better. Don't we start every season with those goals in mind? Well, this year I mean it!

Last year I started ten peat pots each of nine varieties of tomatoes. That translated into ninety tomato plants! I gave seedlings to my two brothers who always compete with me to get the first and best and most tomatoes. I also gave seedlings to neighbors and as many of my gardening friends as I could convince to take them.

It's a little late now to start plants from seeds, unless you want to grow tomatoes for the fall season. So for your summer crop, just buy nursery plants and transplant them into your garden. We usually put our seedlings in the ground the first or second week of April to avoid the chance of frost. Tomatoes like temperatures around 70 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit and full sun which means at least six hours of morning sun. When transplanting tomatoes it is okay to plant them deep in the ground, just make sure that the top four leaves are showing. Tomatoes will push out roots all along the stem and they anchor the vine into the ground and make it much stronger.

This year we will plant two "indeterminate" varieties: the Early Girl and Arkansas Traveler. Indeterminate varieties set fruit along a vine stem that will continue to grow, flower, and set fruit until the first frost, if you keep harvesting. They need a cage or a strong stake for support.

The rest of my crop are "determinate" varieties, which means they grow in a more compact form and produce most of their crop in a short period of time. These bushes can be grown on the ground or supported by a cage. Here are the ones we are planting.
"Sugar Baby' is the earliest tomato I know and it produces in about sixty days from transplanting. It has 1-2 ounce super-sweet, salad size fruit.

'Red Rocket' is another determinate variety that takes off early with bright red tomatoes in the 8-10 oz range. One of my Master Gardener friends asked "How did you get these tomatoes so red and perfect?" I did nothing special at all, they just grew that way!

The 'Bush' is another determinate variety that only gets 18 inches tall and spreads that far. This plant is drought tolerant, not fussy about the soil and yields medium to large fruit with a hint of sweetness and a mild flavor. This year I plan to plant it into a homemade, bottomless European trough to keep the tomatoes off the ground.

'Applause' matures a week or two later. It has 8-12 ounce fruit with a delicious flavor. It is also a compact plant, so it would fit nicely in a flower bed and still yield plenty of fruit for backyard barbeques. We grow five determinate plants in the flower bed close to our outdoor kitchen for convenience of harvest. I don't recommend planting an indeterminate variety in such a location as it would quickly grow out of bounds.

We are also planning to try one of our Son's favorite heirloom tomatoes. He grows organic tomatoes along the coast. His first choice is the 'Purple Cherokee', first grown by Cherokee Indians in what is now Tennessee. It always sells out first at the Farmer's Market in Ventura.

Our last favorite is the 'Ace 55VF' which matures in about 90 days and after the other determinates are past their prime. This Ace is lower in acid than most and is resistant to disease.

When you look for seeds or seedlings pick those with initials after their name like V which means it's resistant to Verticillium Wilt, F for Fusarium Wilt and N for Nematode. There are other initials which mean the plant will be resistant to those diseases.

Good cultural practices are the best way to prevent diseases and pests. This year we will spread three inches of shredded bark around each plant before they get bushy and heavy with fruit. This will keep the fruit clean, retard weed growth and retain moisture. We plan to use soaker hoses and run them several hours twice a week.

We use composted steer manure instead of fertilizer. Tomatoes don't need lots of nitrogen, and too much fertilizer will just grow a big vine with fewer flowers. We also don't use pesticides. We have hundreds of flowers, herbs and native plants in our big yard, which attract beneficial insects and birds and these critters help control our insect pests. We handpick any tomato hornworms that the birds miss.

After writing this article I can't wait for that first bite of a vine ripe tomato!

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