

10 Tips for Terrific Tomatoes

After a number of years of watching gardeners attempt to grow tomatoes, I have learned that there definitely is no one single way to do it. I've also learned that there are some basic techniques and rules of the game, which are nonnegotiable. Here is a list of ten ways to increase your chances of success in tomato growing.

1. Don't plant in the shade. Six hours of sun is minimal.
Sunlight = large, tasty fruit.
Shade = skinny, straggly vines.
2. Prepare the site by mixing in organic matter and fertilizer. Most soils are too low in organic matter and fertility.
3. Plant in raised beds. Raised beds warm up earlier in the spring. Also, sometimes it rains too much and tomatoes can't swim!
4. Select locally proven varieties with a VFN after their name. There are plenty of diseases and insects out there that would love to have a shot at your tomatoes. By selecting a VFN variety you are two diseases and one case of nematodes ahead. Plant two or three varieties to "hedge your bet". There is no "perfect" variety! The variety that was #1 last year may be an "also ran" this year.



Tomato 'Bush Early Girl'



Tomato 'First Lady II'

5. Use a starter solution at transplanting. This gets plants off to a good start. This could be either a synthetic "liquid feed" product or an organic solution like compost or manure tea, or fish emulsion. Pour a cup of diluted solution in the planting hole and then water plants in with the same solution after planting.
6. Mulch soil a few weeks after planting to control weeds and hold moisture. Mulch also reduces some disease problems.
7. Stake or cage plants to keep fruit off the ground. Caging without suckering = more, smaller, later fruit. Staking and removing suckers = fewer, larger, earlier fruit. Take your pick!
8. Feed plants weekly with a balanced fertilizer beginning after the first fruit set. Growing, producing plants get hungry. Once the first fruit set you really need to push plants along with good nutrition, especially the new hybrid varieties.
9. Water regularly when the weather begins to warm up. Deep soakings are best.
10. Inspect plants regularly for signs of insect and disease damage. Early control is very important!