

Growing Great Tomatoes

Notes from 2/23/17 presentation by
Kansas State Extension

Heirloom Tomatoes

- Open pollinated and can replant the seeds
- Oftentimes have disease issues

Hybrid Tomatoes

- Can't save seeds- won't resemble parent plant due to genetic variation

Select short stocky plants or stake leggy plants. Contrary to popular belief, plant at normal planting depth, the same level as growing in the pot. Planting deeper slows growth when bottom of roots are planted in colder soils. Tomatoes need warm soils. Delay planting until soil temperature is at least 55 degrees F at a 2 inch depth. The earliest planting is normally in early May but not sooner.

Diseases

Tomatoes have many disease issues. The most common diseases are Septoria Leaf Spot and Early Blight and no varieties are known to be resistant. To manage these foliar diseases:

- When the first lower leaf flower cluster forms, remove leaves and suckers below the cluster.
- Wait to mulch until early to mid-June to allow the soil to warm first. Use 2-3 inches of an organic mulch.
- Do not water over the top of plants and water about 1 inch per week during dry spells
- There are no organic fungicides. The fungicide Chlorothalonil should be sprayed every 7-10 days beginning in mid-late May before disease symptoms are seen.

Fusarium and Verticillium are soil borne fungal diseases that infect the vascular system and kill the plant. If you have these diseases, only plant resistant varieties that are stated on the plant tag or seed package. Rotate tomatoes out of infected areas for as many years as possible.

Other Disorders

- Blossom End Rot is caused by a calcium deficiency from uneven moisture and temperatures. You can minimize this disorder by fertilizing with calcium nitrate or treating the fruit early with liquid calcium.
- Cat facing is due to poor pollination. Tomatoes are wind pollinated, not insect pollinated.

Spider Mites

Often show up in July and usually infest the top 1/3 or so of the plant. Look for a bronze/yellow whitish color on the underside of the leaves. Mites are not insects and using an insecticide can make the problem worse. Treat plants with a strong but not damaging water spray, in the morning, every day for 3-5 days or use insecticidal soaps or horticultural oils that are labeled for tomatoes.

Squirrels love ripe tomatoes but you can beat them to it by picking the fruit at the "mature green" stage when you see a star pattern on the underside of the fruit, or, pick when it just starts to ripen. Finish ripening on the kitchen counter- they'll taste like vine ripened.