Ventura County Garden to Table Series – Tomatoes

Tomatoes are in the Solanaceae (Nightshade) family – along with peppers, eggplant and potatoes. Tomato seeds were brought from Mexico to Spain by those early explorers – where the plant spread to Italy by the mid-1500s where it began to be incorporated into regional cuisine. Most tomato varieties available to the home gardener produce flavorful and juicy fruit and require relatively little space – each tomato plant can bear 10 to 15 pounds or more of fruit.

# **Helpful Terms**

# Tomatoes are described as determinate or indeterminate based on the plant’s growth habit.

# Determinate — Also known as “bush” tomato plants. The plant stops growing at a set height of about 3‐5 feet, bearing fruit within a 4‐6-week period. These may be best for containers.

# Indeterminate — The plant continues to grow and set fruit all summer until killed by frost or disease. Unless supported, indeterminate plants tend to sprawl on the ground.

# Maturity – the number of days from transplanting seedlings to first mature fruit.

# Disease resistance – tomatoes are susceptible to several disorders – below are some of the most common identification codes used for tomatoes.

# VF — resistant to Verticillium and Fusarium wilt (common fungal diseases).

# VFNT — same as above plus resistant to nematodes & tobacco mosaic virus.

# **Varieties & Types to Consider**

# **Beefsteak** – a type of tomato rather than a variety, usually large, irregular shaped with solid flesh.

# **Cherry** – small, fruit with plants ranging in size from dwarf to over 6’ tall.

# **Container** – midget, patio, or dwarf varieties are ideal for small-space gardening – usually short-lived.

# **Standard** – produce fruit ranging from a few ounces each to very large tomatoes.

# **Heirloom** - an open-pollinated variety that has been passed down for at least 50 years through several generations in a family, ethnic, religious, or tribal group, or commercially introduced before 1940.

# **When and Where to Plant**

# Plant from late spring to early summer after nighttime and soil temperatures have warmed up.

# In full sun, they require plenty of light and room to grow to be a strong plant.

# At least 3’ - 4’ from previous year tomato planting.

# Avoid bruising the main stem – handle plant by root ball – press soil firmly around each transplant.

# They require plenty of room (3’ is recommended) to grow well – indeterminate should be supported.

# **A drawing of a tomato plant  Description automatically generatedHow to Plant**

# Plant when transplants are about 6 to 8 inches tall – water thoroughly before setting out, and best to plant in late afternoon.

# In a container, make sure it is large enough for a full-grown plant.

# Roots will form on buried portion of stem – pinch off lower leaves for more roots.

# Removing the first and second flower cluster as soon as they appear will result in a better overall fruit set.

# **What About Support**

# **Cages** – install shortly after plants are established – 2 strong stakes on either side of cage prevent falling over as plant grows heavy. Pruning is not necessary.

# **Stakes** – use stakes at least 6’ long – drive them 1’ into soil about 4” – 6” inches from plant. Attach heavy twine or strips of cloth every 10” as plant grows. Pruning is usually required.

# **Trellises** – similar to staking plants are tied at regular intervals and pruned. Plants may be set along a fence or trellis and then trained upward as they grow.

# **How to Keep Them Alive**

# **Watering** - tomatoes are medium in rooting depth and need regular irrigation during growing season – every 3 days (more if it is hot and dry). If droopy in morning need to water – however, they do not like the roots to be very wet and try not to get the leaves or fruit wet – only the soil.

# **Fertilizer** - general purpose fertilizer (10-10-10). Healthy transplants should not require additional fertilizer until flowering and fruit set are well under way. Excessive nitrogen during the initial growth period results in lush green vegetative growth but will delay flowering and fruit set. Don’t over fertilize.

# **Pest Control** - Hornworms - Large, droppings on the ground beneath tomato plants usually indicate hornworms.  Handpick or snip hornworms with shears. Aphids - Use a spray of water and if you have an infestation, you can use pesticides that are safe for veggies, follow directions and watch for bees!

# **Mulch…Mulch…Mulch…** 3” – 4” will reduce soil moisture fluctuation and discourage weeds.

# **When and How to Harvest**

# For the best flavor - harvest when fruit are at full color for the variety.

# Ripe tomatoes should be stored at 55 to 70 degrees – they should not be refrigerated.

# Place harvested immature tomatoes in a shaded location to further ripen the fruit.

# **Cooking Tips and Recipe Ideas**

# Tomatoes can be roasted, baked, broiled, grilled, sautéed, sun dried (dehydrated), and marinated – don’t be afraid to explore the different ways to prepare tomatoes.

# Use them on a pizza, with pasta, stuffed, as a sauce, in a soup – the uses for tomatoes are endless.

# Of course – there is nothing better than a fresh tomato – in a sandwich or as a salad.

# **Resources**

* UC IPM [Home Page - UC Statewide IPM Program (ucanr.edu)](https://ipm.ucanr.edu/)
* UC ANR - Master Gardeners of Ventura County - https://ucanr.edu/sites/VCMG/
* UC ANR Home Gardening- Home Page - https://ucanr.edu/sites/vric3/Home\_gardening/
* UCANR Vegetable Gardening- https://rng.ucanr.edu/Gardening/Vegetable/UCDavis

