

TROUBLESOME TOMATOES TAKE TACTFUL TENACITY

By Ralph E. Mitchell

Don't feel bad - many gardeners have expressed their trouble growing tomatoes in Charlotte County! I have experienced some problems as well, especially when compared to my northern tomato experience. Growing this vegetable has sometimes left me feeling that I had fell short of the mark. However, I am always determined to do a better job the next time. This article will hopefully help us both!

Let's start with the selection of varieties. There are a good amount of tomato varieties to fill anyone's demand. In reviewing a partial list, here is a random review of what's available. Under the category of indeterminate (that is, the tomato plant continues to grow into a vine suitable for staking) large fruited varieties we have Better Boy, Bragger, and Manapal. Indeterminate, small fruited types include Sweet 100, Red Cherry and Sweet Million. Bush-types which are called determinate (it will stop growing at a certain point) are Floramerica, Flora-dade, Solar Set, and Celebrity. Other types of small-fruited determinates includes Floragold, Roma and Patio. Check these out at your local garden center or seed catalog. An Internet search of tomato specialty sites is also advised.

You can have nice five-inch transplants in about four weeks from seed. Start seeds in peat pots, flats or small pots. Use a sterile potting medium and plant the seeds about one quarter inch deep. Transplant seedlings into your prepared garden site enriched with compost and a commercial fertilizer such as 6-8-8 or its equivalent, at a rate of five pounds per one hundred square feet or as directed on the package. A soil test may also be advisable to give you some insight into your

soil's nutrient profile. In our area, the fall garden should have its tomatoes installed during the August to September window of opportunity so that they will mature before frosts threaten in early winter. Spring and summer tomatoes should be limited to cherry-types as large types just cannot produce in the extreme heat. Tomatoes grown for staking should be placed about twenty-four inches apart in rows up to thirty-six inches apart. Set the plants out in the relative cool of the late afternoon slightly deeper than they were in the growing container. Water the plants in well and provide shade for a couple of days so that the stress on the plants will be minimized. A starter liquid fertilizer solution can be made out of one to two tablespoons of 6-8-6, 4-8-8, or a similar fertilizer, in one gallon of water. Provide one pint of this solution per plant for a fast start.

Continue caring for your tomatoes by mulching and staking. Mulching will help maintain an even moisture level in the soil. Using a six-foot stake pounded into the ground three to four inches, tie the plant up with soft strips of cloth or other material. Pruning out side branches before they can develop will send all of the energy towards growing large (but fewer) quality fruits. Tomato cages and other trellising techniques are also available. Make sure to provide tomatoes with about one inch of water per week. New watering technology using drip or trickle irrigation equipment is worth looking into as it conserves water.

Using no more than five pounds 100 square feet total for the rest of the season, follow the initial fertilizer application with a portion for side dressing (placed about four inches away from each plant stem) about three weeks after

planting. Additional fertilizer can be applied at 10-day intervals later in the season.

Consider container growing for tomatoes. Use clean five-gallon buckets, bushel baskets or something similar making sure that there is adequate drainage. While extra care must be given to fertilizer and water needs in container culture, this method of growing tomatoes may help prevent nematode problems and provide alternative growing

possibilities for homes with small spaces for gardening.

Various diseases and insect pests may occasionally cause problems. Selecting tomato varieties that are resistant to diseases such as fusarium wilt, early blight and even creatures such as certain nematodes will go a long way in pest suppression efforts. Read the seed packages and transplant labels carefully as they will indicate this attribute.

If you have tomato gardening problems, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm until 4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our **Plant Clinics** are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden** every Thursday from 9:00am until 11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** 9:00am until 12:00pm every Monday.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of the month from 1:00pm until 3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of the month from 1:00pm until 4:00pm.

Monthly **Plant Clinics** are Saturdays from 9:00am until 12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Peachland Promenades Publix** - 2nd Saturday of the month.
- **Home Depot Murdock and Home Depot Punta Gorda** - 3rd Saturday of the month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by e-mail (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener from 1:00pm until 4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by e-mail (Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

Resource: Stephens, J. M. (2003), Tomatoes in The Florida Garden, The University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS.