

Tomato Transition

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This has been an excellent spring tomato season. It is unfortunate that our Top Tomato Contests for area gardeners have been canceled for the summer because of the Covid -19 precautions. I think if the contests had been held, we would have seen lots of large, uniform, and attractive fruit.

Well, despite the absence of tomato competitions, it is time for area tomato gardeners to harvest the remaining fruit, pull the old plants and prepare for the fall crop. I am sure there are moans and wails from some gardeners saying “no way” “my plants have been wonderful this spring and they still have some productivity left in them, plus they deserve more loyalty than to be discarded in late June”.

The truth is that plants left in place in July are more likely to produce spider mites and fungal diseases than continue to produce a bountiful crop of tomatoes. Experience has proven that they also have considerably less potential than a new fall planting to produce a good crop in the fall.

Start by harvesting all the good size fruit of the old plants. Green tomatoes can be used like squash in recipes and fruit with any color will complete ripening on the kitchen counter.

Examine the old plants, if they have dusty looking leaves or other symptoms of spider mites, the plants should be discarded in a garbage sack rather than the compost pile. Be careful to let the mites fall off the old plants so they do not just reinfest the new plants.

Also examine the roots of the pulled plants to look for nematodes. The nematodes will survive in the root nodules for long periods and readily infest new garden areas through spreading of the compost. Instead of putting the infested roots in the compost, also put them in a garbage sack.

Another reason to get the new plants in place before the end of July is that in past years some of the recommended tomato varieties were partly selected because of their fast production in the fall. Surefire was one that always seemed to beat the cold weather even when it was planted later in the season. It is no longer available. The recommended tomato varieties available for planting in the fall produce high quality fruit but need to be in place before August 1.

After the old plants and any surrounding weeds are removed prepare the soil for the fall tomato crop. It is best if you can incorporate 2 inches of compost in the planting area along with 10 cups of slow release lawn fertilizer per 100 sq. feet. The 19-5-9 formula product works well.

Plant the tomatoes in full sun. Support the plant with its expected load of fruit with a tomato cage. The tomato cage also can serve as a frame for agricultural fiber to protect the fall tomatoes from the first light freeze in the fall to extend the growing season.

Select from the varieties Tycoon, Red Deuce, HM8849, Celebrity, Red Snapper, Phoenix, Valley Cat, Ruby Crush, and BHN 968. Celebrity, BHN 968, Tycoon, and Valley Cat are nematode resistant so use them in any ground that has nematodes.

BHN 968 and Ruby Crush are tasty cherry tomatoes that are faster to produce fruit than the larger tomato varieties. Another especially fast producer is the canning tomato Roma.

If spider mites were a problem on the spring crop or have been a problem in the past use the preventative spray, made from seaweed extract. Mixing 2 tablespoons of the product with a gallon of water and spraying it under the leaves of the fall planted tomatoes will slow down spider mite development.