

Tomato Gardening

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When we talk about tomato planting in the San Antonio area March 15 is a key date. It is when the soil is usually warm enough that a transplant put in the ground will not stop growing because of the cold. It was recommended that gardeners who obtained their plants before March 15 pot them up in a container so they can be sheltered in full sun out of the wind until now. The “potting up” also allows you to reserve a few plants for planting after April 1 just in case we have a late cold spell or hail.

In addition to this timing, successful tomato growing requires correct variety selection, site preparation and pest control.

Select a tomato variety that grows to its full size quickly and then concentrates on setting and maturing fruit before it gets too hot in the summer. It will ideally finish its production by mid-July when the plant can be pulled and retired to the compost pile. A new crop is planted in early August. Tomato plants that stay in the garden beyond July are more likely to produce fungal diseases and insects than more fruit.

Recommended varieties include Tycoon, Celebrity, Valley Cat, 444, Red Deuce, BHN 968 (cherry), Ruby Crush (cherry), HM 8849, and Red Snapper.

Red Snapper is the Rodeo tomato for 2020. Selecting a Rodeo tomato is a long-time field-testing effort that benefits area gardeners. Every year David Rodriguez, Larry Stein, Jerry Parsons and their Texas A&M AgriLife team identify which of the existing and new hybrid tomatoes perform best under Central Texas conditions. HM 8849 was the Rodeo tomato in 2019.

If your soil is infected with nematodes, the varieties Celebrity, Tycoon, BHN 968 or Valley Cat are nematode resistant.

Plant tomato transplants in a raised bed in full sun. The planting site soil should be enriched with 2 inches of compost and 10 cups of slow-release lawn fertilizer per every 100 square feet of bed (19-5-9 works well).

Tomatoes also produce well when grown in containers. Fill a container that is at least 15 gallons with high quality potting soil enriched with a fertilizer for containers such as Osmocote. Half whiskey barrels work especially well as a tomato container.

Plant tomatoes in the garden at least 3 feet apart. Tomatoes are not xeriscape plants so keep them well watered. Drip irrigation is the best option. Surround the plant with an aluminum or steel tomato cage to support the plant and fruit. Live oak leaves work well as a mulch.

Keep spider mites at bay by spraying seaweed extract diluted at 2 tablespoons per gallon of water under the leaves each week. Confer with plantanswers.com if other insects or disease symptoms appear.

The main goal in growing tomatoes in our gardens is to produce the tasty homegrown fruit. More and more gardeners however are getting involved in competitive tomato contests. It is easy to participate, and the prizes are great. Depending on the contest they can be generous gift certificates or useful gardening supplies. Competition categories include full size fruit, cherry tomatoes, and largest fruit in

addition to the Top Tomato. One contest even has a “salad bowl” category. Two of the most fun events for you to target are the Top Tomato Contest hosted by the Bexar County Master Gardeners on Saturday, May 30, 2020 from 9am to noon at Fanick’s Nursery and the Spring Top Tomato and Salad Bowl Contest at Milberger’s Nursery on Saturday, June 6 from 10:30 am to 12:30pm. It is hosted by the Gardening Volunteers of South Texas. For more information on the two events go to the respective websites of the hosts. There are some simple tricks and arrangements that make it more likely your tomatoes will win some of the prizes. Visit plantanswers.com and watch this column for that info as we proceed towards the Contest dates.