

Fall Tomatoes

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If you want to raise and harvest a fall tomato crop it is time to start. The key to producing and harvesting a crop is to plant transplants of determinate or semi determinant varieties that can set fruit in the heat. The determinate tomatoes grow to full size quickly and then concentrate on setting fruit.

Prepare the soil by incorporating 2 inches of compost and 10 cups of slow release lawn fertilizer into every 100 sq. ft. of planting area. You can use compost from your own compost pile, bagged material from the nursery, or a commercial mix delivered by one of the many suppliers in the San Antonio area. For the slow release lawn fertilizer, product with the 19-5-9 formula works well and is available at most nurseries. The same fertilizer works well to provide nutrients to the growing plants. Side dress each plant with a quarter cup every 3 weeks.

It works well for me to plant 3 tomato plants in an 8 ft row with the rows 2 feet apart. Drip irrigation is the best way to irrigate but hand watering works well. You can create a short-term irrigation system that approximates a drip system with a leaky hose strung between the plants. The key to keeping it efficient is to only turn the spigot a quarter turn and let the water leak out. Newly planted tomatoes will need watering every day if it is hot and dry.

Transplants are available at area nurseries. I like the 4.5-inch containers because they have adequate root development to prosper in the heat. It appears that Tycoon, Red Deuce, HM 1823, Sunbrite, 444, 602, Valley Cat and Bobcat will be available to produce large fruited tomatoes. The key to beating the cold weather is to plant them now as quick as possible. You can also use large transplants in one-gallon containers for a head start.

The Ruby Crush and BHN 968 are excellent cherry tomatoes for the fall. They work well in containers and in the raised bed gardens.

In early August two varieties especially suited for the fall garden will be available at some San Antonio nurseries. Surefire and Roma Surprise produce tennis ball size fruit after a short development period. They can be expected to beat the cold weather every autumn.

If all or part of your garden is infected with nematodes, the BHN 968, Tycoon, Celebrity and Valley Cat are nematode resistant.

Support the tomato plants with a tomato cage and apply 2 inches of mulch over the root system and you will be in good shape to harvest a good fall tomato crop.

Spider mites are less a problem in the fall as temperatures cool, but a seaweed extract preventative spray can be used to disrupt the spider mite reproduction. Mix 2 tablespoons of the extract in a gallon of water and spray once/week under the leaves.

There has been considerable discussion this summer about the advantages of shading the tomato plants from the July and August sun. Some kind of temporary cardboard lean-to or fabric on the tomato cage blocking the west sun may contribute to plant success.