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**“Growing Tomatoes and Peppers in Containers”**

Tomatoes and peppers make excellent container plants.

First a container needs to be selected. A five gallon, plastic bucket will work if you poke some half-inch holes in the bottom for drainage. The 15 gallon containers are even better or larger food containers available at Costco are great for container gardening. A half whiskey barrel is also perfect for a tomato or pepper plant. The large soil reservoir provided by the large container means that you may not have to water every day and that there is no danger that the fruit-laden plant will tip over in the wind.

Decorative containers also work well as long as they are large enough and have enough drainage holes.

Do not use regular soil from the backyard in the container. It does not drain as well and may be prone to compaction. You can add finished compost to the mix (20-30 percent), but the easiest soil to use is pure potting mix. It is sterilized and drains very well.

Unless it is a potting mix that has already had fertilizer added, potting mix is nutrient free. Even for pre-fertilized mixes, incorporate Osmocote, Multicote or another slow release fertilizer formulated especially for containers at planting and then again in four to six weeks. Another option is to water with a water soluble fertilizer once per month after the initial fertilization.

Place the container in full sun out of the wind if possible. Full sun is the most important requirement however.

To plant your tomatoes, bury the root ball in the container and press the soil firmly around it. The newly planted tomato and the soil in its pot need to be soaked to the point of sogginess at planting. Water from the top until water emerges from the drain holes and then water again. After the initial watering, water every time the soil is dry to the touch.

Support your tomato or pepper plant in a container with an aluminum tomato-size cage that can be poked into the soil at the edge of the container.

Plant one pepper or tomato plant per container. Almost every pepper variety makes a good container plant. They are usually compact and well-proportioned with shiny green leaves. The ornamental peppers are especially decorative and all peppers are edible. The most desirable peppers for the table, such as yellow banana, jalapeño and serrano, are also very attractive.

There is more variation in tomato plants.

Patio tomatoes are especially compact with thick decorative foliage, but the fruit is not high quality.

Among the best tasting tomatoes, select determinate or semi-determinate varieties. That means they grow quickly to full size, 4 or 5 feet and then stop growing and concentrate on setting fruit.

My favorite tomato varieties for container tomatoes are BHN 968 (Cherry Surprise) and Tycoon.

Cherry Surprise is a cherry tomato that produces a steady supply of quarter-size fruit on a relatively small plant. Unlike the typical cherry tomato, it does not produce a plant that grows all summer to 7 or 8 feet tall.

Most tomato varieties have advocates that like its taste but others find it lacking. Cherry Surprise is a consistent tomato taste test winner. If you find transplants on the market, purchase a few.

Another all-star container tomato that has all but disappeared from the transplant market is Surefire. It produces a tennis ball size fruit on a small plant. Again, buy it if you find it.

Tycoon appears to be the most popular full-size tomato for Central Texas gardeners. It also does well as a container plant. Other varieties that can be used are Phoenix, Celebrity, Valley Cat, Tigress, 444 and Solar Fire.

**“Garden Tasks”**

Control fire ants by applying a quick-kill product such as acephate or spinosad (organic) on hills near your activities. Apply a bait-like Amdro and spread it sparingly (as per label) over the rest of the yard for long-term control.

To enrich your raised bed garden for spring vegetables and flowers, incorporate 2 inches of compost into the soil. Use your homemade compost or order some delivered.

Apply mulch over the root system of shrubs, trees and perennials to conserve soil moisture.

Check out the drip irrigation kits at the home and garden stores. It is the most efficient way to water container plants and gardens.