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Growing Great Tomatoes

By Karen Gross

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For many people, growing big juicy tomatoes is part of what makes vegetable gardening so enjoyable. Whether purchasing plants from your local nursery or starting tomatoes from seed, there are a few basic steps to follow to ensure that you harvest an abundant crop at the end of the growing season. There are many different varieties of tomatoes to choose from, depending on whether you will be cooking, canning, slicing, or eating miniature or grape-like varieties right off the vine. Sweet 100's are very abundant, and are good for salads as well as eating fresh from the garden. Roma tomatoes are good for making salsa, because the peels are not as tough as others so you don't need to peel the skins off. Romas are also known as the classic paste and sauce tomato. There are Early Girls, Early Boys, Big Boys, Big Mamas, Sweet Baby Girls, Beefsteaks, French Rose hybrids, Big Rainbow, specialty tomatoes and many more. So start by choosing the kind of tomato you would like to grow.

Planting Tomatoes from Seeds

Tomatoes grown from seed will require six to eight weeks before they can be planted in the garden. Purchase individual containers or flats, starter soil or mixture, and the seeds of your choice. Fill each container with soil, pressing it tightly to remove air and to avoid settling problems after watering. Typically, seed companies print instructions for planting right on the tomato seed package. Each variety is a little different so follow instructions carefully. Prepare a label identifying the type of tomato and the date started. You can make your own from Popsicle sticks or purchase them at the store or garden center.

Insert your label in the pot and mist with water. Place containers in a sunny window and keep seeds moist by placing a plastic bag over them. Small greenhouse containers are also available at your local nursery. Watch for seeds to germinate and remove plastic when plants emerge. Wean out weaker looking seedlings to give strong ones more room to grow. Keep moist by misting or watering tomatoes when needed. When plants have a second pair of leaves it is time to transplant these seedlings to your garden or a large pot in which they are to grow.

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It is a good idea to harden off or acclimatize a plant to outdoor conditions before planting by setting it out in direct sun during the day and bringing it in at night. After a few days, the tomato plant will have adapted to the new surroundings and can be transplanted in the desired location. Place plants directly outdoors after the threat of frost in a shady location, out of the wind and protected from heavy rains.

Purchasing Started Plants

If you prefer to purchase plants from your garden center or greenhouse, select dark green plants that are stocky in size and that do not have any fruit. The fruit will stunt the plant growth and the total yield will be reduced. Tomatoes are one of the few plants that will tolerate being planted deeper than they sit in the pot. So a taller plant can be placed a little deeper if preferred. As mentioned, harden off the plant before moving it to a final location.

Preparing Garden Soil For Tomato Plants

The soil should be deep, loamy, and well-drained for the best harvest. Tomatoes prefer a slightly acidic soil with a pH of 6.2 to 6.8. The term pH balance refers to acidity or the alkalinity of your soil from a numerical scale of 1.0 to 14.0. The neutral point on the pH scale is 7.0. Higher than 6.5 indicates alkaline soil, lower than that indicates acidic soil.

Test kits are available at garden centers or through local horticultural organizations. To raise the soil's pH, work agriculture lime into the soil. Use sulfur to lower the pH of alkaline soil. Using fertilizers and compost amendments will also change the soil's pH over time. Adding decomposed organic compost will improve any soil structure. You can purchase or make your own compost. Once you have cultivated your garden area and prepared the soil, it is ready for the plantings.

Planting The Tomatoes

Inspect all of the transplants, looking for insects, wilting or blight. Plant only healthy plants. Tomatoes prefer full sun, so choose an area with at least six to eight hours of sun per day. Practice crop rotation in your vegetable gardening by planting tomatoes and other vegetables in a different spot every year. Tomatoes prefer to be planted by chives, parsley, marigolds, nasturtiums, garlic bulbs, and carrots. Avoid planting tomatoes by potatoes or members of the cabbage family.

For large healthy tomatoes, give them plenty of room to grow. Space plants twenty-four inches between rows and leave twenty-four inches between plants. With your shovel or spade, make holes slightly larger than the plants. Tap gently on the bottom of the individual container, loosening the soil and gently removing from the pot. Tomatoes are susceptible to cutworms, but placing a 3-4 inch nail next to each stem before planting or wrapping strips of newspaper around the bottom of the stems will help prevent these pests. A paper cup surrounding the stem also works well.

Place tomato plant in hole and back fill with soil until it is well compacted. Place a rack or cage around each individual plant to help support future growth. Water around the base of the plant, avoiding the foliage. Do not over water or soak the seedlings as this can promote disease and rot. Water early in the day to discourage blight.

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Using a rake, spread organic mulch, such as weed-free straw, over plants at least two inches deep. This is an effective way to prevent weeds, preserve water and keep the soil warm, thus reducing the maintenance required for vegetable gardening. Fertilize the plants throughout the growing season with compost or organic matter. Water when needed and inspect leaves periodically for the signs of tomato blight and insects. If blight is discovered, remove any infected leaves and destroy them. Treat plant with a fungicide. Be sure to remove all debris from your garden in the fall, as blight can survive on the dried tomatoes over the winter.

Most tomatoes take 100-days to bear fruit, so follow these easy directions and get ready to harvest the fruits of your labors and enjoy that first BLT of the season.

Items Needed For Growing Tomatoes:

- Tomato seeds or plants
- Containers or flats
- A small greenhouse kit or plastic bags
- Starter soil or mixture

- Marking pen
- Popsicle sticks or labels
- Rake
- Spade and shovel
- Water, sun, adequate soil and patience

Karen Gross is a professional gardener and design consultant. She writes for www.vegetable-gardening-4u.com, providing valuable tips and advice about

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and other vegetable gardening topics.

Tomatoes Fight Cancer Best When Used With Broccoli

By Dr. John Roberts

A recent study suggested that eating tomatoes and broccoli together can enhance the anti-cancer potency possessed by tomatoes and broccoli.

In the study, rats were injected with human prostate tumors. And they were fed powdered tomato and dried broccoli. Used also in the study was finasteride, a drug that shows to slow the benign growth of the prostate.

The study found that the rats use diets with tomatoes and or broccoli get the smaller tumors. The diet with both tomatoes and broccoli is most effective and finasteride is least effective in slowing the tumor

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growth.

Tomatoes are known for its anti-cancer properties. Lycopene is believed to be the major active component in tomatoes that is responsible for the anti-cancer activity.

Anti-cancer bioactivity has been reported in broccoli. It's believed that glucosinolates may be responsible.

The study was conducted by Dr. John Erdman and colleagues at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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John Roberts is a freelance writer for

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Why Do You Need To Eat Tomatoes?
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Tomatoes and Cucumbers
Lycopene, One Of The Most Potent Carotenoid Antioxidants

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