

TOMATOES

SOIL AND LIGHT

Tomatoes prefer fertile, well-drained soil, but they will grow in almost any kind of soil. The fertility and drainage of the soil can be improved by replacing the soil or by incorporating organic matter from a compost pile or other source. Tomatoes require full sun. If they are planted in an area that receives less than full sunlight, they will be adversely affected.

FERTILIZING

Ample, but not excessive amounts of fertilizer applied during soil preparation will help tomato plants grow rapidly and produce well. Generally, a 7-14-7 fertilizer gives good results. Tomato plants benefit from fertilization while growing. When the first fruit is about the size of a loonie, fertilize with a granular or water-soluble fertilizer. Repeat this 2 - 3 times at approximately 3-week intervals. Poor foliage colour and stunted growth indicate a need for additional fertilizer.

WHEN TO PLANT

Tomato seedlings should not be planted outside until the soil has warmed and there is no threat of frost, generally Victoria Day weekend. If there is danger of frost after the plants are put outside, they may be protected with paper, newspapers, or boxes. After planting, the soil should be firmly pressed around the plant so that a slight depression is formed to hold water. Then pour approximately 1 pint of water (fertilizer may be added) around each plant to wash the soil down around the roots.

STAKING AND SPACING

If compact cultivars are grown or if the plants will be staked, space 18" apart in rows 3' apart. Unstaked plants need to be spaced 3' apart in rows 4 - 5' apart. Staking makes it easier to cultivate and harvest tomatoes, and helps prevent fruit rots. However, staked plants are more subject to losses from blossom-end rot than plants allowed to grow naturally. Blossom end rot is a disease that causes blackened areas on the bottom of the tomatoes. Add garden limestone to the soil each year to provide calcium, which will generally prevent blossom end rot. If staking is to be practiced, it is a good idea to insert the stakes soon after transplanting to prevent root damage. If the plants are staked and pruning is desired to prevent excessive foliage, remove the small shoots that appear at the point where the leaf stem joins the main stem. Do not disturb the fruit buds. It is best to prune by hand. Grasp the shoot with your thumb and forefinger, bend the shoot sharply to one side until it snaps, and then pull it off in the opposite direction.

WATERING

Tomatoes need about 1" of water per week. If rainfall is deficient, plants should be thoroughly watered 1 - 2 times a week. Heavy soakings at infrequent intervals are better than many light sprinklings. Avoid sprinkling over the plants as this encourages some diseases. Weed control is essential since they compete with tomato plants for water, nutrients and sunlight. Weeds also harbor insects and diseases and may be hosts for nematodes.

MULCHING

Mulches are used to help keep weeds down. They also reduce water loss from the soil and stabilize soil temperature. Black polyethylene and landscape fabric are the simplest means of mulching, due to the ease of Fall removal. When using these types of mulches, apply the fertilizer to the soil surface first, before covering with mulch. Bark mulch also works well and may be turned into the bed in the fall to compost and improve soil quality.

HARVESTING

Tomatoes should be harvested after they are fully ripe. If tomatoes are picked at a mature green stage they can be ripened at temperatures between 55 and 72F. Light will increase the colour of tomatoes somewhat, but it is not essential to ripening.

FALL CLEARING

Remember to remove all leaves, roots and debris in the fall to help prevent over-wintering of insects and diseases. All of these materials may be composted for future use in soil renovation.