

Sweet, Ripe, Luscious Tomatoes!



Written by Judy English, certified WSU Clallam County Master Gardener.

Are you longing for ripe tomatoes fresh from your garden? If you grew up in an area where summer days were hot and humid and the nights only slightly cooler, you've probably enjoyed what seemed like an endless crop of luscious tomatoes. Unfortunately, in the cooler and shorter growing season of the North Olympic Peninsula, growing tomatoes is typically easier than ripening them to their sweet, juicy maturity. However, it can be done.

Select tomato varieties adapted to our climate. (See sidebar.) Regardless of the type, all tomatoes need deep, loose soil that is high in organic material with a pH of 5.5 to 7.0. Soil that is high in organic material has better drainage and warms faster than dense, clay-like soil. Do a soil test and prepare your soil properly; good soil will hasten plant growth and maturity, and improve yield.

Site selection is equally important. Plants need at least 6 hours of sunlight each day. An ideal location is in full sun, on the south side of a building where plants will benefit from both direct and reflected heat. Tomato plants also need good air circulation to prevent mildew, but should be protected from too much wind that will reduce the temperature around the plants. Consider planting your tomatoes in containers that can be moved to "follow the sun," a raised bed to improve drainage and increase soil temperature, or a hoop-house to better control the environment.

Soil temperature should be at least 60 degrees when the tomato is planted in the ground. For many gardeners, this is early June. Planting too early will delay growth, and the production/ripening of the fruit.

Tomatoes can be planted in a hole or in a trench. In both methods, before planting, fill the hole/trench with water and let it be absorbed; then add slow-release fertilizer that is low in nitrogen, covering the fertilizer with 2 inches of soil. Remove the plant from its container and separate the roots if they are encircling. Trim off all but the top 3 or 4 branches/leaves.

Hole method: dig a hole deep enough to bury the roots and lower portion of the main stem.

Trench method: dig a trench approximately 6 inches deep and long enough to lay the plant on its side. While gently bending the plant so the remaining branches/leaves are above ground, bury the main stem and roots.

In the trench method, roots are closer to the surface where the soil is warmer. In both methods, roots will grow along the buried stem.

You can provide vertical support or allow the plant to ramble. Mulch the plant to maintain ground temperature and moisture. Give each plant 1-2 gallons of water weekly. Fertilize tomatoes again two months after planting with a low nitrogen fertilizer.

Blight is the most common problem for tomatoes in a cool environment. To prevent blight, select healthy plants without dark spots on leaves; destroy volunteer plants; avoid overhead watering; and ensure good air circulation.

Tomato varieties

The tomato varieties you select are important. Cherry-sized tomatoes ripen faster than full-sized tomatoes. Varieties suited to cooler environments ripen earlier than varieties developed for warmer climates. “Indeterminate” tomatoes produce fruit throughout the season; “determinate” tomatoes produce fruit over a 2-3 week period and set minimal amounts of fruit thereafter.

Among the many varieties that have been grown successfully on the North Olympic Peninsula are Sun Gold (cherry-sized), Ispolin and Bloody Butcher (both indeterminate) and Beaverlodge Slicer (determinate). Check with your local nursery or garden center as to which varieties they have available as seeds or plants.

Master Gardener Judy English grows her tomatoes against a sunny wall that protects the tomatoes from wind and provides reflected heat.

