

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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There is nothing that compares to the taste of a ripe, homegrown tomato. It doesn't matter if it is red, pink, yellow, white, or green or if it is large, medium or cherry. You grew it and it didn't cost \$3.00 a pound. Although tomato plants are not the easiest plants to grow, they are the most popular plant that most gardeners grow.

Tomato plants should be set out in the garden about the middle of May. Before then, the soil and weather conditions are too cold, and stress the plants. Too much exposure to cold can cause cat facing which is due to incomplete pollination.

When buying your tomato plants, look for a good deep green color and for stocky, short plants that look healthy. Check the pot to see if the soil is moist and rich-looking. Do not buy wilted plants or plants with yellow leaves. Protect them from the elements on the way home. If you must put them in the back of an open pickup, lay them down and cover them up, to prevent wind and cold damage.

Tomatoes need sun so don't plant under trees or in shady places in your garden. Afternoon sun is better than morning sun so think about a south facing wall, which can speed up fruit growth. They also need well drained soil, one with compost, peat moss and fertilizer worked in to it. A 5-10-10 fertilizer is OK for tomatoes, but work it into the soil well.

Set your plants deeper in the soil than they are in the pots they came in. Plant almost up to the bottom leaves, all of the stem that you put below the soil will produce roots and give you a much stronger, healthier plant. Put your plants on a watering schedule and keep to it. Tomato plants need to be kept moist so you must water at least every third day and only water at the base of the plant. The actual recommendation is one inch of water per week so a slow deep watering is best.

Tomatoes come in two growth patterns determinate where the plants are bushy and most of the tomatoes get ripe around the same time. These are also good for canning or freezing or making some determinate tomatoes are Oregon Spring, Glacier, Roma and Italian Paste, Fantastic, Stupice and Lemon Boy plus many others too numerous to list.

Indeterminate is the other growth pattern, these plants will continue to grow and produce tomatoes throughout the growing season. Indeterminate plants are usually staked because they can grow very tall and rangy. Some indeterminate tomatoes are Early Girl, Fourth of July, Matina, First Lady and also Early Cascade. Cherry tomatoes such as Sun Gold, Sweet Million, Sweet 100, Yellow Pear, Gold Nugget, Snow White Cherry, Gardeners Delight, Jolly Elf, Christmas Grape and Red Pear are also Indeterminate. These are some of the varieties plus more that will be at the Master Gardner Plant Faire. Happy Gardening!

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.