

Growing Great Tomatoes Even in North Idaho

The best tomatoes like sun and long, hot summers to ripen; so it's always a challenge to mature them in North Idaho. The secret is to plant varieties that produce well in cool spring weather and in a short amount of time. And we want ones that taste good, too!

When you bring your plants home, it's best to put them in bigger pots so they can continue to grow while you wait for the soil to warm and frost to end. Give them plenty of light during the day – outside is best, and then bring them in at night. Fish emulsion is a good fertilizer for them at this stage. Memorial Day is the usual “safe frost” date, but Mothers Day (mid May) is becoming more common. Some people have good luck with “Wall-O-Waters”, or you can build removable cold frames over your raised beds with hoops and plastic. There is no sense in planting tomatoes too early-you will just have to replace them when they freeze! One reason tomatoes get blossom end rot is lack of calcium, so when you plant them, make sure there is plenty of calcium in the hole – use bone meal or crushed eggshells. They need ample nutrients, with high phosphorous. I like boxed organic fertilizers. Give them plenty of room, up to 3' apart for the varieties with large vines. Water them infrequently but deeply. This is really important for tomatoes. Encourage a big, deep root mass. Tomatoes have better flavor with less water, and too much watering will make them crack. Uneven watering is another cause of blossom end rot.

Staking – do whatever works to keep the fruit off the ground and get some light into the plant. For the bigger plants, I use cages secured with 2” x 2” posts, driven in at planting time. Make the posts long enough so you can drape a tarp over them in the fall if frost threatens. As the plants grow up, I encourage them to stay in the cages and tie them up. Use figure 8 ties or tie from cage to cage; don't bind the stems or they can't grow properly. The smaller plants can sprawl, but I find them easier to work with when they are staked. Fruit needs light but not direct sun, as this will sunburn it. I remove some of the suckers but not until a little later in the season when I'm sure there is no chance of them producing before frost. Suckers are actually new branches that will produce fruit if given enough time. Bush varieties should be left alone. The indeterminate plants need topping toward the end of the season if there is an abundance of leaves to let in light and encourage the plants to ripen the tomatoes they have. Each variety is a little different, so treat them according to their need.*

***Determinate vs. Indeterminate – what does this mean?**

Determinate tomatoes set their crop then stop flowering, so they ripen basically all at once. Romas and many bush types do this. Indeterminate varieties just keep flowering and setting fruit until they are killed by frost. The vines are generally big and rangy like cherry tomatoes, beefsteaks, and many mid-to-late season red slicers. Since our season is so short, this isn't much of a factor, but it can help to cut back the tops on the big indeterminate varieties. If you had a greenhouse, the indeterminate varieties would keep bearing for a long time if it was warm enough.

Whatever varieties you choose, a little effort will ensure earlier and tastier tomatoes.

Susi Faville “The Tomato Lady”