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Column: “Northwest Missouri Horticulture”

Release Date: October 2, 2014

Headline: Tim’s Tips for Terrific Tomatoes

Most home gardeners love to grow tomatoes. They are easy to grow, although there are a few problems that crop up from time to time. While spring may seem a long way off, successful tomato production actually starts in the fall. I developed the following tips to present at the annual Buchanan County Tomato Fest a few weeks ago.

- 1- Pick a good site to grow them. Look for good, well-drained soil at a spot that gets full sunlight all day long.
- 2- Soil test. This should be done immediately, this fall.
- 3- Add lime or sulfur if needed, based on your soil test. Do not add nitrogen this fall.
- 4- Cover crops are great! They reduce erosion, and add organic matter to the soil. If you choose a legume cover crop, it will also add nitrogen to the soil.
- 5- Prepare soil in spring- fertilize as recommended. Don’t over fertilize! Till in your cover crop. Use raised beds. Don’t over-till!
- 6- Choose a good variety... but experiment. Disease-resistant varieties will help.

7- Plant when the conditions are right. If it's too wet or too cool... it's best to wait.

8- Keep them off the ground! If you are growing determinate tomatoes, cages are fine. For indeterminate tomatoes, it's best to stick with tall stakes and twine.

9 – Earlier, irrigate only when needed. Less frequent irrigation will force roots deeper. Later, irrigate regularly, especially when fruiting. Consistent irrigation reduces blossom end rot. Don't use overhead irrigation.

10- Mulch, mulch, mulch. Mulch is great for keeping the weeds down and conserving moisture. Don't mulch too early with organic mulches. They insulate the ground and keep it cool. Early in the season, that isn't what you want. You need to soil to warm up.

11- Watch for diseases. Spray if needed, before disease spreads.

12- Monitor for insects. Don't spray unless they are really a problem.

13- Watch out for weeds. They rob moisture and nutrients from your tomatoes. A hoe works great, but mulch is better.

14- Call your friendly MU Extension Horticulture Specialist or Master Gardener for advice, if needed.

If you follow these tips, you will hopefully be able to avoid common tomato problems, and be well on your way to success.

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