

The Garden Corner

By: Art Kammerlohr

Master Gardeners of Johnson County Missouri

Thanks to above normal temperatures, everyone has been bitten by the gardening bug and all sorts of activity can be observed throughout the county. Now that the soil temperature has risen, many of our residents are planting America's number one food crop: tomatoes. While there are entire books dedicated to this food source, by following good gardening practices anyone can successfully grow their own delicious fruit. Here are some basics to keep in mind.

As with all things green, success begins with soil preparation. Tomatoes prefer an acid base to grow well – you're looking for a range of 5.5 to 6.5 ph. To find out what your range is, a ph meter will do the trick or a soil test.

Once you're satisfied the soil is ready, you need to choose which broad type of plant to purchase. Tomatoes fall into two categories: determinate or indeterminate. If you want to gather all your tomatoes at one time and be done with them for the season; then chose determinate. If, on the other hand, you would like to have tomatoes until the first frost; then indeterminate is the way to go. With all the varieties available, how do you know which is which? Simply look on the label – not only will the label tell you which kind the plant is; but, it will also designate how the tomato has been bred to withstand many of the diseases and fungus that can decimate your crop. Without going into all the definitions of the letter abbreviations found on the label, you're safe in purchasing a plant that has many capital letters on the label. If you just have to know what those letters stand for, give me a holler and I'll send you an exhaustive list.

Ok, now you've gotten your soil prepared and you've purchased your tomato plants. Now comes the time to put the plants in the ground. What about the site? Two things are important to remember: (1) Six to eight hours of direct sun is best; and, (2) Don't plant your tomatoes in the same spot as last year. And if you've ever had fusarium wilt (droopy foliage accented by yellowing leaves which eventually drop off), don't use that site for at least three years. When putting your plants in the ground, pinch off the lower branched leafs leaving only the top of the plant undisturbed and then bury roots and exposed stem either straight or lying on its side. The more of the plant you get into the ground, the better the root structure to support the plant.

The final step in planting is to mulch the area around your tomato being careful not to put mulch up and around the main stem. Tomatoes thrive when soil moisture is fairly consistent and placement of mulch will help achieve this result. If you have satisfactorily performed all the steps to this point, all you have to do now is monitor for pest and keep the surrounding soil uniformly moist. How important is watering for tomato growth? If you have had blossom end rot and/or cracking of the outer skin in the past, there is a good chance your watering technique needs improvement.

There are a whole host of things that can go wrong while trying to grow this most popular type of home food source. If you have a specific question, give me a holler at email: maandpak@embarqmail.com or write to: 370 NW 121 Rd., Warrensburg, MO 64093 and I'll get right back with you. Until next month