

April 2022 GARDENER'S CORNER

By Cate White, UCCE SJ County Master Gardener

Spring is an exciting time of year for gardeners. Many of us look forward to growing summer vegetables, and tomatoes are usually at the top of the list. Nothing beats the flavor of a juicy, ripe tomato sun-warmed and just picked from the garden!

Although tomatoes are hardy plants that thrive in our valley climate, they are subject to a few pests and diseases, so care is required when planting and growing them. Among the threats are Fusarium and Verticillium wilts, fungal diseases that invade plant tissues and block water uptake, causing wilting and eventual death. These diseases are present in the soil and live over year to year. The best way to prevent them is to plant disease resistant varieties, usually labeled V, F and FF, and to avoid planting tomatoes in the same spot year after year. Insect pests include aphids, best controlled by insecticidal soap sprays, and the Tomato Hornworm, a large caterpillar which can be picked off and disposed of by hand.



Photo by Cate White

Prepare the soil before planting by enriching with compost and/or manure, worked into the top inches of the soil and watered in thoroughly a few weeks ahead of planting, to avoid burning the plants. Tomatoes require nitrogen and phosphorous for optimum growth, which can be added as chemical fertilizers prior to planting, especially if manure is not used. Additional nitrogen can be added once the plants are established. Alternatively, use a slow-release fertilizer high in these nutrients added at the time of planting. In our area, the best time for planting small transplants is from late March to early May. Six plants should provide an ample supply for a family of four.

When planting, bury the stem of the tomato up to the first set of leaves. The plant will send out additional roots from the stem. The only exception is if you buy a grafted tomato, available in some nurseries. Grafted tomatoes, especially heirloom varieties, can provide additional disease resistance. These should be planted at soil level. Plant about 3 feet apart, and use staked cages for support. Cages keep the plant off the ground, which prevents the fruits from rotting. As the plant grows, keep poking protruding branches back into the cage. Try to water so that the soil remains evenly moist, but not waterlogged. Be aware that tomatoes generally will not set at nighttime temperatures lower than 50 to 55 degrees, or when daytime temperatures consistently rise above 100 degrees.

You will find a huge variety of plants available. There are determinant varieties that are bushier, and bear for a limited time, while indeterminant varieties are more vine-like, growing larger and continuing to bear until frost. You can choose from large slicing types such as "Beefsteak", standard sizes including "Early Girl", "Ace" and "Celebrity" or cherry or grape sized varieties like "Red Cherry" and "Juliet". In addition, there are paste varieties suitable for canning or making sauces, such as "Roma" and "San Marzano". Tomatoes also come in different colors, including yellow or orange like "Lemon Boy" or "Sun Gold", green, as in "Green Zebra" and multicolored, like "Big Rainbow" or "Pineapple". Some, including "Cherokee Purple" and "Brandywine" are purple to pink when ripe. If you have limited garden space, there are even tomatoes bred for containers, such as "Patio". It's fun and interesting to experiment with new varieties; you may find some that grow particularly well for you, or that have distinctive flavors you enjoy. Label your plants and keep a record of how they perform.



Sun Gold Tomatoes
Open Source Photo

If you are interested in finding some unusual varieties grown by local gardeners, check out the Linden Community Garden Club's annual plant sale at the Linden United Methodist Church in Linden on Saturday April 9th from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.



A sampling of the many tomato colors and sizes.
Open Source photo

APRIL GARDEN CHECKLIST

- **Warning for Cat Owners:** Lilies are highly toxic to cats. This includes Easter Lilies, Asiatic Lilies, Star-gazer Lilies, Day Lilies and more. All parts of the plant are toxic, causing kidney failure. Even licking lily pollen that has rubbed onto their fur or drinking water from a vase containing lilies can be fatal for cats. Cat owners should avoid bringing Easter Lilies into their homes. If you think your cat has come into contact with a lily plant, seek immediate veterinary care.
- Start planting frost sensitive plants now, including citrus, tomatoes, eggplants, peppers and basil.
- Control aphids by spraying plants with a strong stream of water or applying insecticidal soaps or oils. Monitor citrus for Asian Citrus Psyllid.
- Fertilize citrus, deciduous fruit trees and flowering shrubs with a slow release fertilizer if not done in March.
- Adjust irrigation according to the weather and be sure plants are properly mulched.
- Prune winter flowering shrubs like viburnums and camellias.
- Keep up with weeds by pulling or cultivating.