

The Tomato What's Spring Got To Do With It?



by Carol Seminara, HCMG

According to my calendar, spring isn't sprung until March 21. That's the official date of the vernal equinox when night and day are nearly equal in length signaling the return of warmth and new beginnings.

If we were ancient pagans, we'd dance clockwise in a circle holding violets and chanting, and then feast on eggs and early ripening vegetables like asparagus.

But we're Hill Country Texans and so to herald the end of winter's lethargy we plant tomatoes. Tomatoes are the most popular garden vegetable crop in Texas and grow well in most areas.

Our pals at Texas A&M University (TAMU) recommend several varieties of tomatoes for planting, including: Bing, Carnival, Celebrity, Florida 47, Porter, Red Cherry, Small Fry, Roma, Sun Pride, Sun Leaper, Sweet 100, and Tomato 444.

My personal experience last year with the hybrid 444 tomato was a stunning quantity of delicious, well-formed fruit on large, sturdy plants. Tomato 444 was named a Texas Superstar in 2004 for its natural resistance to Tomato Spotted Wilt Virus (TSWV) and its productivity. I've already got a six-pack of 444s sitting in the green house, awaiting transplant.

And wait my little plants will, for although last Friday (2/27/09) we had record highs in the low 90s (yes, it was still February last Friday, that's what that 2 in the date above means) by Saturday night (2/28/09) it was below freezing. I used to call this kind of fluctuation the vagaries of Texas weather, now I just view it as another lesson in humility.

Tomatoes are classified as a "warm season" crop, which means they can tolerate warm to hot temperatures but are injured by cool temperatures (usually below 50°F). AgriLife Extension guidelines recommend planting tomatoes "on to 8 weeks after" the last freeze date. According to the Average Date of Last Spring Frost map that means March 16 or 31 is the appropriate time to plant tomatoes depending on where you live in Kerr or Gillespie counties. You can consult this [Frost Map at Aggie Horticulture](#).

Old-timers recommend waiting to plant tomatoes until Good Friday, which falls on April 10 this year. That might seem too late for some brave garden gamblers, so a good compromise might be to plant half of your tomato plants in mid- to late-March and save the remainder for planting until April. You might even want to hold back a couple of plants for early May, in case of further weather wackiness.

Tomatoes are suitable for small and large gardens and need a minimum of 6 hours of bright, full sunlight a day. A little partial shade can be welcomed in the middle of late summer's blazing heat. Cherry tomatoes are considered a moderate maturity rate crop taking 69-80 days for the fruit to ripen. Larger variety tomatoes have fruit that is slow to mature, 80 days or more.

Like just about everything that grows in the garden, tomatoes prefer fertile, well-drained soil. Routinely adding organic matter such as compost, leaves or rotted hay to your garden site will improve the texture and quality of our uber-alkaline soil. Work the top 4 to 6 inches of your garden soil and never try to work soil that's too wet (a moot point these days).

Generally, the rule for transplants is to plant them so the garden soil level is the same as the soil level of the container. Tomatoes, however, are able to develop roots all along their stems so the popular wisdom is to plant them deep to generate a larger, stronger root system. Transplant tomatoes in the evening or on a cloudy day to help keep them from wilting.

Tomatoes require deep, regular watering while they are developing. Irregular, inconsistent watering (no water one week, too much water the next) can lead to blossom end rot and/or cracking. Conversely do not allow your tomato plants to wilt severely or you can negatively impact your fruit yield.

Mulch helps stop weed growth and conserves water (particularly important in this continuing drought) but wait to apply mulch until the ground is warm. If you mulch too early, it will shade the roots and thereby cool the soil. Tomatoes like warm toes.

Tomatoes can grow on the ground, but most people prefer to cage or stake their plants for aesthetics, air circulation, sunlight penetration and better access to the fruit. If you plan to install support for your tomatoes, then do so shortly after transplanting to prevent root damage. Set stakes at least 10 inches into the ground. Use thin strips of rag or thick twine for ties being careful not to damage the stems. Cages should be securely fastened to the ground (by staking or other means) to avoid being blown over by the wind and/or toppled by heavy plants.

This year husband Joe is experimenting with an upside-down hanging tomato planter. Because this growing chandelier is portable, he's been able to carry it outside on sunny days and whisk it safely inside on those chilly Hill Country nights. The jury's still out on this, but I'll keep you apprised of our progress with so-called Topsy Turvy Tomatoes.