



FROM A GARDENING PERSPECTIVE...

TALKING TOMATOES

By

Carolyn Barnard, Palo Pinto County Master Gardener

A recent Tarrant County Master Gardener Association program provided tips on successfully producing tomatoes in north Texas gardens.

Tomatoes originated in what is now a part of Peru and only made it back to the Americas via Europe in the 1820s. Since tomatoes are related to the nightshade group of poisonous plants, they were thought to be deadly at worst and the object of witchcraft spells at best. It was not until Capt Robert Gibbons Johnson actually ate a basket of tomatoes on the steps of the Salem, New Jersey courthouse - and lived - that tomatoes gained acceptance as edible vegetables. Tomatoes are now considered America's favorite vegetable.

There are a few special things to consider when growing tomatoes:

- Size of the plant should be appropriate to available growing space
- Variety selection should be based on time to harvest and disease resistance
- Insect identification & control should be considered
- Harvest time is important

Tomatoes are labeled as determinate (plant stops growing at some point) or indeterminate (plant will continue to grow). This is not related to production, but to the size of the plant. There should be enough space between plants to allow for good air flow and enough plants in the garden to support anticipated consumption.

Tomatoes will not set fruit when the average night time temperature is over 70 degrees, usually in late June in North Texas. Since it takes 4-6 weeks to grow a 6 inch transplant, starting seeds indoors in January or February is recommended. Seeds can be sown in flats of a soilless mix with seeds covered with ¼ inch of mix. Using peat pots eliminates the transplant process. Both flats and pots should be kept moist and stored where they can get lots of light. (At the time of publication of this article, it is too late to start tomatoes by seed).

Since most tomato plants take 6-8 weeks to mature, the earlier they are planted the better. Plants should go in the ground just after the average date of last freeze – usually mid-March in this area. Wrapping wire cages with row cloth will protect plants from a late freeze and strong spring winds. Smaller varieties are most suitable to the North Texas climate since they do not take as much time to mature. Whether buying seeds or plants, check the label to identify disease resistant varieties.

When determining whether to treat for insect or disease damage, identifying the source is the first step. There are many internet resources to help with diagnosis. This is one is available for download:

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/vegetable/problem-solvers/tomato-problem-solver/leaves/>

Once the source is identified, determine whether the damage is serious enough to need treatment. Many problems can be managed with garden practices such as avoiding over/under watering, amending soil with organic matter, removing damaged plants quickly, rotating crops with non-related crops or even building physical barriers. If it is necessary to use an insecticide, select the product that targets the pest identified since many products will kill related beneficial insects as well.

Tomatoes ripen from the inside out, so it is possible to harvest them when they just start to color. They will continue to ripen and the risk of bird damage will be less.

Enjoy a scrumptious Tomato crop! If you have questions about growing tomatoes in Palo Pinto County, call our extension office at 940-659-1228.

NOTE: Palo Pinto Master Gardeners will be having an EDUCATION DAY on Saturday, April 26. They will have speakers from the Texas Forest Service discussing Firewise Landscaping, Ways to adjust your existing landscape to protect your home from wildfire, and Plants that can enhance the beauty of your home without increasing fire hazard. There will be a registration fee.