



Tomatoes in Pickens County (2008)
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(with ideas borrowed from lots of folks!)



Each year, I review what happened last year in the garden, and add a little to my “how to grow better tomatoes” article. Here are this year’s recommendations:

1. Soil test! Do your soil test now and we’ll know what to tell you when you ask us what to fertilize your plants with. To get accurate results, take a trowel and bucket and dig up a shovel full from ten places in your garden. Take these samples at least 3 inches deep. Mix the samples together well, and bring us one pint. Easy! Normally, gardeners test their soil every two years. The cost is \$8 for each sample.
2. Grow your own plants! Yes, you can do it! You can choose the varieties that you want, and start your plants in late February. Ask at our office for the publication, *Growing Transplants*. Growing your own transplants will prevent your tomatoes from being affected by white flies and diseases that may come from other greenhouse grown plants. There are lots of seed suppliers with many unique varieties of seeds available. If you need help locating a supplier, call us.
3. Think about using fluorescent lights above your seedlings to make them healthy. Use a warm light bulb and a cool light bulb to simulate the sun’s natural light. This is cheaper than official grow lights, and works just as well. Be sure to move the lights regularly to keep the leaves just touching the bulbs. Using a simple timer will help you maintain a 16 hour day. Your tomato will think it’s spring the whole time!
4. Don’t be in a hurry to plant your tomatoes. They must have warm soil. I know there are techniques to ripen tomatoes earlier, but this information sheet is for the new tomato grower. If I get mine planted by late April to mid May, that’s ok. A great weather information site is our www.georgiaweather.net. Select the Calhoun weather station from the drop down menu, and you can see the current soil temperature along with lots of other useful information.

Things to remember while planting tomatoes:

1. Don’t work the soil until it’s dry and warm enough. You should be able to grab a handful of soil in your palm and squeeze it and it should fall apart in your hand. If it doesn’t, it is too wet and could turn into clay rocks if you work it. If you want early tomatoes prepare the planting bed in the fall so all you have to do is to plant them. The soil temperature should be over 65 degrees at the 4 inch soil depth.
2. If you haven’t done a soil test, mix a cup of regular white Dolomitic lime with your fertilizer and add this to each planting hole. Plant your tomato on a raised mound. The raised mound should be 2 – 3 inches higher than the surrounding soil. Why? This raised area along with tip # 3 below will help keep the disease, bacterial wilt, from killing your plant.
3. Your tomato plants will be 10 to 24 inches tall when you plant them. Cut a piece of aluminum foil **3 inches wide and 4 inches long**. Fold this **loosely around the upper stem** of the plant – below the top 3 or 4 leaves. When planted this foil should be half in the ground and half out of the ground, protecting the stem at the ground level from contact with the soil. This may help prevent bacterial

wilt, the disease that suddenly kills plants when they are full of tomatoes in July. It also works to prevent cutworms, and will work on peppers also. It keeps them safe from bacterial wilt and cutworms too!



4. Bury your plant as deep as possible up to its top 4 leaves. Yes that deep! Stem and all down in the ground. You can plant it in a deep hole, or lay it sideways and curve the stem gently to the surface. New roots will form all along the stem down in the soil. **Spacing:** Be sure to give your tomatoes plenty of room to grow. They need both sun and air circulation to keep them healthy. The plants should be 4 to 5 feet apart so that they don't touch one another when they are mature. Each row should be 5 feet apart. This works well for me.

5. Watering with a soaker hose is a very efficient method of keeping your plants growing without wetting the leaves – try it! There are all sorts of other ways to water using jugs and pipes and other inventive methods. Keeping the soil just moist is a very important and allowing the soil to dry out occasionally is good for disease prevention.

6. Mulch your plants 2 feet in each direction immediately. Put down thick layers of newspaper, then wood chips, wheat straw or pine straw mulch on top of that to keep the paper from blowing around. I even mulch between the rows (no weeding) doing the same process. Provide moisture with a soaker hose or bucket only if it gets real dry. You'll be surprised how little you'll have to water them if you mulch a large area, and you will also improve the soil with your mulch. Mulching also prevents soil from splashing on the lower leaves, which is the cause of our most common tomato disease, *late blight*. This disease attacks the bottom of the plant, killing the lower leaves and turning them yellow and slowly creeping up the plant. You can only **prevent** diseases, not cure them.

7. Stake or support your tomatoes now. Use whatever method you desire. It is very important to keep the plants off the ground and upright so the air can circulate around them easily. I have graduated to using concrete reinforcing wire, which holds up well over time. Put a good long stake into the ground beside it to keep it from being blown over by the wind, this is especially important when the plant is full of tomatoes.

8. Most of folks use a little granular fertilizer mixed in to the soil at planting. Regular fertilizer is okay, just follow the soil test recommendations. If you are using a liquid type fertilizer only, like Peter's 20-20-20 or Miracle Grow, it's a good way to go also. Just use it regularly as the label recommends. I use Osmocote, a slow release type fertilizer I mix in the soil at planting, that way I don't have to remember to fertilize it. Don't be tempted to over-fertilize plants when they are young. Get them blooming first, and then push them hard with fertilizer.

9. Add Stop-Rot to your fungicide sprays to prevent blossom end rot. Blossom end rot is when the bottoms of the tomatoes on your plant turn black and rot and you have to throw them away. Stop Rot is calcium chloride and it adds the much needed calcium to your plant. Follow the directions on the label. I like to see people spray with Stop Rot weekly, once the tomatoes are one foot tall. Making sure the ph is where it is supposed to be and consistent watering will also help prevent this problem. Prevention is the key here.

10. If you grow organically, you have some real challenges from here on out. Disease control is the problem. I am investigating what could possibly be effective; I'll let you know about this later. Organic disease control in tomatoes is difficult.

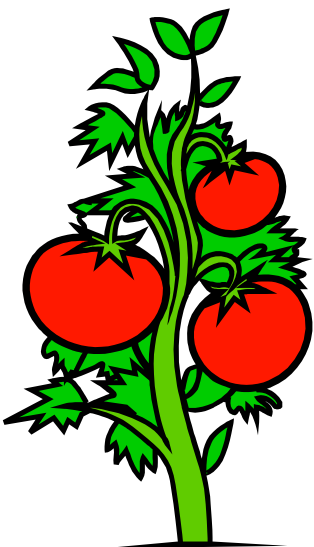
11. Use a fungicide if you want to pick tomatoes until frost. It is important to know that diseases are prevented; not cured with the fungicides homeowners can use. Spray with Daconil 2787 or Chlorothalonil the day you plant, and then at least once a week until they start blooming. You can continue spraying with a fungicide up until August if you choose too. This will prevent most all diseases that will sneak up on you. Occasionally we see bacterial leaf spot which must be sprayed with a copper-based fungicide, such a Kocide 101 or similar fungicides. **Do NOT mix fertilizer with fungicides.**

12. Always clear up dead/diseased plants or plant parts as soon as you see them and dispose of them. Keep your garden clean! When a plant finishes producing its crop pull it out or plow it under. Once a plant starts declining, it's hard to bring it back into production.

13. I rarely see insect problems on tomatoes. Keep an eye out for insects like the giant hornworm and pick them off. Aphids can be a problem early in the growing season. You will see them on the new growth on your tomatoes leaves. Safers insecticide soap or Malathion will control them. Sometimes a good strong squirt with a hose will get rid of them too.

If you have some hints you want to share, drop me a note or call, and we'll pass'em on. Hopefully if you do the above you'll be bringing me and all of your friends extra tomatoes. Try some **new** varieties this year and have some FUN! We always like to taste test different varieties. Bring your favorite by the Depot for us to try.

I hope this helps you have a successful tomato garden this summer. I look forward to seeing some of these tomatoes at the big tomato contest at the Jasper Farmers Market this summer.



Ideas to Make This Summer's Gardening more Productive:

Tomato Pollinating: Although tomatoes are self-pollinating, they need air or wind movement to transfer pollen. If it is hot and calm for several days, gently shake plants for assured pollen transfer and fruit set. Hot temperatures, drought, and hot, dry winds can cause pepper and tomato pollen to die. This in turn causes blossoms to drop off or interferes with blossom set. Try misting plants twice a day to cool them and help the blossoms set fruit.

For the Best Tomato Flavor: Remember what a tomato used to taste like? Well, you can still get this great, fresh flavor. For the best flavor, pick ripe tomatoes as needed; flavor peaks within three minutes of picking. If you must wait to use garden fresh tomatoes, don't refrigerate them! Keep them on the counter at room temperature. Fruit texture and some aroma compounds deteriorate quickly in the cold. Try old and new varieties.



Cucumber notes: Cucumbers develop a bitter taste if the soil is not kept consistently moist. Harvest for pickling whole when 2 to 4 inches, and for table use when longer than 5 inches. Remove any overripe cucumbers to encourage continuous production.



Don't use a weed and feed type fertilizer in the garden: Weed killers don't know a vegetable from a weed. They may injure or contaminate your crops. Gardeners continue to buy weed and feed, and I continue to get calls, "I only have corn growing in my garden—what happened to my tomatoes?" The weed and feed kills broadleaf plants and most of the garden plants except corn are in the broadleaf family. Remember, this product is for the lawn only and not to be used on gardens or on areas where trees, shrubs, or annuals and perennials are growing or are going to be grown.

