

**Friday's Feature****By****Theresa Friday**

August 2, 2009

**Fall for tomatoes**

The tomato is one of the most popular vegetables grown in home gardens. Gulf Coast gardeners revel in the planting of tomato plants in the spring. But unless you have grown hot-set tomatoes or the small fruited cherry and grape varieties, your tomato plants may have stopped setting fruit by mid-summer.

Most tomatoes are sensitive to night temperature. They set fruit best when it is near 70 degrees F. When tomato plants experience night temperatures lower than 55 degrees F or above 75 degrees F, interference with the growth of pollen tubes prevents normal fertilization. The pollen may even become sterile, thus causing the blossoms to drop.

High daytime temperatures, rain, or prolonged humid conditions also hamper good fruit set. If the humidity is too low, the pollen will be too dry and will not adhere to the stigma. If the humidity is too high, the pollen will not shed readily. Pollen grains may then stick together, resulting in poor or nonexistent pollination.

But living along the Gulf Coast does have its advantages. Since our first frosts generally don't arrive until late November or early December, gardeners can enjoy a fall crop of tomatoes.

Unless spring tomato plants were protected with routine fungicide applications they are probably infested with diseases by now. If the foliage is yellowed and spotted and if production has ceased, it's best to start over.

Visit area nurseries to find out what transplants are available. For the adventuresome, try some unusual varieties by starting them from seed, which can be ordered from specialty tomato seed companies.

Move to a new spot in the garden for your fall planting. You are asking for trouble if you plant tomatoes in the same spot more than once. If you know that you have nematodes or soil-borne diseases, try growing your tomatoes in a container with fresh potting media.

Of course, it's important to prepare beds properly before planting this next crop of tomatoes. To do that, clear the site of all weeds or finished vegetable plants. Spread a 2-inch to 4-inch layer of organic matter

(leaves, grass clippings, aged manure or compost can be used) over the soil. Turn the soil with a shovel, fork or tiller to a depth of at least 8 inches. This helps to maintain a high level of organic matter in the soil, which encourages a strong, healthy root system, improves drainage, retains moisture, provides nutrients and promotes vigorous plant growth. Be sure to wait a couple of weeks prior to planting if organic matter has been added.

By this time of year, insects and diseases have had all summer to build up their populations, and insects such as whiteflies, stink bugs, aphids and caterpillars are commonly seen. Since insect and disease pressure often is greater in the late summer/early fall than in the spring, watch plants carefully for problems and use appropriate control measures promptly when needed.

The key to heavy fall production is timing. The idea is to have healthy plants that are flowering as our night temperatures begin to gradually drop. If fall conditions are agreeable, it is possible to have fresh vine ripened tomatoes in December.

Fall vegetable gardening is not limited to tomatoes. Both sweet and hot pepper plants produce well if set out at about the same time. Other warm season vegetables can be started from seed in August. These include snap beans, lima beans, cucumbers, southern peas and summer squash.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to:  
<http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu>.

###