

Friday's Feature

By

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Tips for tasty tomatoes

The mention of home grown tomatoes will make a gardener's mouth water. But growing tomatoes in the heat and humidity along the Gulf Coast can be a challenge. Summer can be a tough time for tomatoes to set and hold fruit. The heat causes irregular flower growth in most cultivars, and the result is poor fruit set. Some tomato cultivars are now available that have genetics to beat the heat, but they still won't do miracles. So here are a few tips to make your tomato harvest even more satisfying.

First, be sure to control the pests. Many worms love tomatoes as much as gardeners. The tomato horn worm is that giant, green caterpillar that devours tomato leaves, while the tomato fruit worm bores into the fruit. A biological product called B.t. (Dipel, Thuricide) can be used for control.

Stink bugs will pierce the fruit and leave pin-sized puncture wounds that result in white dots or specks on the tomato. These insects can be very difficult to control. Contact your local Extension Office for current recommendations.



Leaf-footed bug, a type of stink bug, uses its piercing-sucking type mouthparts to feed on tomato fruit, causing corky areas under the skin of the fruit and distortions.

Photo credit: Theresa Friday

Second, water appropriately. Typically, the home garden needs to be watered according to soil needs. Water so that root zones are neither too soggy nor too dry. Morning watering is thought to keep roots cooler and plants less stressed.

Remember to step up the volume and frequency of supplemental irrigation as plants load up with fruit. There is a sudden demand for more water as fruit enlargement occurs and if the extra soil moisture

requirement is not met, then blossom-end rot can ruin your crop.

Blossom-end rot is a nutritional disorder. Too little available calcium, too much or too little water and severe pruning favor its development. This can be corrected to some degree by watering consistently. Spraying the plant with a solution of calcium chloride may also be helpful. Spray according to product labels.



On tomato, blossom-end rot usually begins as a small water-soaked area at the blossom end of the fruit. This may appear while the fruit is green or during ripening. As the lesion develops, it enlarges, becomes sunken and turns black and leathery.

Photo credit: Theresa Friday

Third, mulch plants well to cool roots and even out soil moisture. Research indicates that a white or light-colored mulch is much better than the black plastic that works so well on spring tomatoes. Dark mulches get too hot in the summer.

Fourth, apply a tomato fungicide on a regular basis to extend the season. For best results, a fungicide program should be started before serious disease symptoms are present. One that contains mancozeb (Dithane, Manzate) or chlorothalonil (Ortho® Max™ Garden Disease Control, Ferti-lome Broad Spectrum Landscape & Garden Fungicide) can help to control the fungal blights, while copper sprays can be included for help in controlling bacterial spot.

Fifth, harvest when the tomato is ripe to ensure maximum flavor. The color should be even and bright red. The tomato should be firm but yield slightly to pressure.

Never refrigerate your tomatoes. Refrigeration will result in less flavor and firmness. Keep the tomatoes out of direct sunlight and store with the stem-up to prevent bruised shoulders.

So enjoy your home-grown tomatoes as long as you can. And if the plants don't make it through the heat of the next several months, be sure to plan for a fall-planting in August. If you have trouble finding the cultivars you want, get into the habit of starting your own from seed a month or two ahead of time.

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.

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