



Easy with Growing the Instant Organic Gardener

The quest for the perfect tomato

by Don Rosenberg

Tomatoes are the most popular home-grown vegetable in the United States because their fresh taste is so much better than anything you can get in the grocery store.

Tomatoes are easy to find and easy to grow; nonetheless, results sometimes can be disappointing. The plant is susceptible to insects, disease and wilting. Heirloom tomatoes are increasingly popular, but the older varieties are not disease resistant. The good news is with a little bit of knowledge and planning, tomatoes can be a winner in your garden this year.

Here are 13 tips for terrific tomatoes:

1. **Bush or indeterminate plants? Choose wisely.** Bush plants grow only so tall and then stop growing. They are best for patios and large pots or small gardens with limited space. Indeterminate plants keep growing and growing, offering a continuous harvest.

2. **Use transplants.** Avoid the hassle of starting your own plants from seeds. With all the farmers' markets and locally run garden centers, it's easy to find great varieties. A plant or two per person is all you really need.

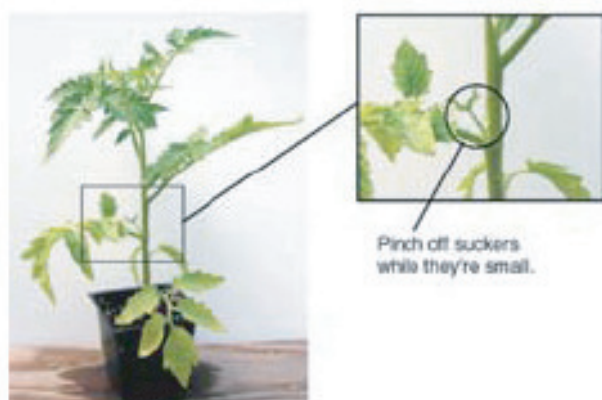
3. **Plant at the right time.** Resist the temptation to plant on the first day the garden centers get their transplants. April 15 is a good time to plant in the greater Charlotte area.

4. **Use the right soil.** Tomatoes thrive in rich soil. Use organic, slow-release fertilizers mixed well with the soil.

5. **Grow in raised beds.** Use potting mix in raised beds for better drainage and easier weed control.

6. **Planting transplants is simple.** Just remove the bottom few branches, pop the transplant out of its pot, and plant it a little more deeply than it was in the pot. After a generous watering, it'll be off to a good start.

7. **Stakes vs. cages.** To maximize air circulation and minimize disease, use tall stakes instead of wire cages. Check your plants every two or three days and pinch off "suckers" – those little sprouts in the elbows of the main branches – to allow for a single, main stem. Left alone, suckers will develop into stems with their own branches, and you'll quickly



Don Rosenberg/CW photos

Pinch off "suckers" (small sprouts in the elbows of a plant's main branches) to strengthen the tomato plant's main stem and to avoid an unwieldy tomato jungle.

end up with a tomato jungle.

8. **Tie them up.** As plants grow up the stakes, you'll need to tie them up. Use 15-inch lengths of soft, sisal twine. Wrap the twine around the stake twice, then tie it loosely under a branch. Resist the urge to tie the plant too soon. Let it grow and strengthen in the breeze first. This will result in a stockier plant with a nice, thick stem.

9. **Remove the lowest branches.** As the plant grows, remove the lowest branches to expose the bottom 12 inches of the main stem. This improves air circulation and discourages disease.

10. **Mulch, mulch, mulch!** Mulching reduces weeds, promotes evenly moist soil and prevents water from splashing up to your plants. Pine needles and pine bark are good choices. A thin layer of dried grass clippings is good, too. I prefer to use compost as mulch.

11. **Water evenly and thoroughly.** Uneven watering causes the fruits to crack, and too much water affects the taste. It's much better to water deeply every three days than lightly every day.

12. **Keep a clean garden.** Remove any dropped leaves and dropped or rotten fruit. Toss old plants in the trash, not in your compost pile.

13. **Maintain and protect.** I don't recommend adding fertilizer while your plants are growing – what's already in the soil should be fine. But spraying the leaves (foliar feeding) is great. You can use various solutions, such as fish emulsion, or you can make compost tea, which is also great for improving resistance to insects and disease.

Now that you know what to do, get out to the garden center, ask about different varieties and get growing! □

Send your gardening questions to gardener@thecharlotteweekly.com.