

Tomato Tips from the Woodinville Garden Club

Growing your own tomatoes can be challenging but there is nothing like the taste of a home grown tomato. In the Pacific Northwest frosts are a concern through early May. The season is short, as first frosts can occur in early October. The Woodinville Garden Club's tomatoes have been chosen with our shorter growing season in mind.

Bringing Your New Tomato Home – be careful to keep them protected until night time temperatures are at least 50 degrees. This may mean bringing them into your garage at night. You should try to plant them as soon as possible but until then, be sure to give them as much sunlight as possible during the day. Don't overwater but be careful not to let them dry out either. (Overwatering is worse)

Planting Your New Tomato – Plant your tomatoes in a warm, sunny spot. If possible, try to protect them from being watered (or rained on) from above. This can be accomplished simply by placing a beach umbrella over your plants when it starts to rain. Or, you can construct your own temporary greenhouse with plastic sheeting. You can plant in a large garden pot, in a raised bed, or directly into the soil. It is important not to plant tomatoes in the same area, (or the same soil) in succeeding years. Tomato blights, mildews, and pests can be better controlled if crop rotation is practiced or at the very least the soil is refreshed. To plant, pinch off the leaves from the bottom 1/3 of your tomato plant, and plant deeply enough so the soil covers these areas. New, healthy roots will emerge from the main stem at these points. You should use a good time-release tomato fertilizer – high in phosphate and low in nitrogen. This will encourage formation of fruit, without overly encouraging leaf growth.

Staking, Pinching, and Fertilizing – Stake your tomatoes with long stakes when you plant them, so you will not have to disrupt your plant later. To encourage large tomatoes, tie the central shoot to the stake, and pinch off non-flowering side shoots. The plant should have enough leaves to shade the tomatoes, but if the leaves are too dense, moisture may be trapped, creating an environment for mildew or blight. Minimize pinching for determinate types. Fertilize regularly with a fertilizer formulated for tomatoes.

As Tomatoes Start Forming and Ripening – Your tomatoes will continue to flower throughout the summer, and marble-sized tomatoes will follow. You will probably have tomatoes at all stages by mid-summer but by late August/early September, you will see that you still have LOADS of tomatoes that need to ripen, and our days will already be growing shorter! At this point, you will need to pinch off ALL remaining flowers and marble-sized tomatoes and cut back on watering. This will allow the plant to focus its energy on the larger tomatoes, speeding their ripening and increasing their flavor.

What If My Tomatoes Get Tomato Blight? We have chosen blight resistant varieties. However, if it occurs as your tomatoes start ripening, you may be able to minimize damage by pinching off any infected leaves. Keep your tomatoes' leaves as dry as possible.

What To Do As The Weather Turns Cold!!! – In late September or early October, there will come a time when you feel you still have tomatoes that need to ripen, but the days are getting too cold to allow them to stay on the plant. At this point, you can remove all the unblemished green tomatoes and put them in a brown paper bag where it is cool and dark. Check your tomatoes often (discarding any that aren't cooperating), and you will see that these late tomatoes will ripen nicely. Or, alternatively, you can find recipes for green tomatoes.

This season, may you have all the joys of raising tomatoes and none of the sorrows!