



PLANNING AHEAD CAN INCREASE TOMATO YIELDS

MARK OWENBY

Tomatoes are probably the most popular vegetable among home gardeners. A likely reason is their great sun-sweetened, vine-ripened taste. If you are thinking of trying to grow tomatoes this summer, early preparation can provide the groundwork for success.

First, you need to be familiar with the plant's problems. Black spots, cracking and twisting of the fruit are common but avoidable.

Start the growing season by making sure soil fertility is adequate to high. Eliminate the guesswork by getting a free soil analysis from the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS). Just take a sample to your local Cooperative Extension Service office or call NCDA&CS's Agronomic Division at (919) 733-2655 for a soil information sheet and sample box.

Next, decide which type of tomato suits your taste or purpose. Tomatoes vary in color, size and maturity so you may want to experiment with several different varieties. Select ones that are disease and nematode resistant. This will save you headaches later. Plant seed indoors six to eight weeks before transplanting or purchase healthy transplants at a local garden center.

Poor fruiting is often a result of low pH and fertility, conditions a soil test will indicate. When preparing your garden, be sure to incorporate the recommended agricultural lime and fertilizer listed on the NCDA&CS soil report. In the absence of a report, you can apply 2 pounds of 5-10-10 fertilizer per 100 square feet of garden. After fruiting begins, scatter one-half to 1 tablespoon of 10-10-10 fertilizer around the base of plants each month. This will keep plants growing until frost.

Another problem almost every gardener has experienced is blossom-end rot. A calcium deficiency in the soil causes a black lesion to form at the bottom of the fruit. Dry soil conditions can aggravate the problem. Try maintaining adequate soil moisture by watering once a week during fruiting. Besides liming the soil to a pH 6.5, you may want to supplement calcium by applying gypsum at a rate of 1 to 2 pounds per 100 square feet of garden space.

Growth problems or changes in plant color during the growing season may signal a nutritional deficiency. The Agronomic Division also provides inexpensive, plant tissue testing for residents of North Carolina. For \$4, the plant/waste/solution laboratory will test plant tissue for 12 essential nutrients and suggest any necessary corrective fertilization.

Fertilization based on soil and plant analysis not only ensures top yields and best quality but also protects the environment from excess nutrients. Indeed, all citizens have a responsibility to be good environmental stewards.