"Vegetable of the Week"

Tomatoes by Cecilia Bernuy

Latin name: *Solanum lycopersicum*

Family: Nightside / Solanaceae

Who doesn't love delicious tomatoes? They taste even better if you grow them yourself. Tomatoes are sun loving, warm season plants. Plant seedlings after the last spring frost and when soil temperature reaches about 70 F. In Chesapeake that is usually after May 1st. Pick a site with full sun for at least 6 hours of the day. Tomatoes love well-drained soil with slightly acidic pH of 6.2 to 6.8.

Many nurseries sell tomato transplants. Make sure the transplants have a strong stem the width of a pencil, green leaves and are up to a foot tall. If you want to start tomatoes from seeds you may start them indoors 6-8 weeks before the last frost. Pinch off a few of the lower branches on transplants and plant the root ball and stem deep enough so that the remaining lowest leaves are just above the surface of the soil. Tomatoes plants will grow roots from the buried stem, creating a stronger root system. Place tomato stakes or cages at the time of planting so you won't damage the roots later. Water generously the first few days that the tomato seedlings or transplants are in the ground. Water about 2 inches per week during the summer. Always water deeply to encourage a strong root system.

There are 2 main types of tomatoes, determinate or bush type and indeterminate or vining type. Bush type tomatoes reach a determinate height of about 24-30 inches and their terminal growing points end with flowers and fruits. They have a shorter growing period but produce their fruit sooner and within a 4-6 week time frame. This type of tomato is best for small spaces. Indeterminate or vining tomatoes need a trellis, cage or stake because, as their name says, they are vines that can grow 5 feet and up. Their terminal growing point grows continually with the leaves and their flowers and fruit grow along the side branches along the stem. Vine tomatoes will produce fruit throughout the growing season and will not stop producing fruit until the first frost.

During the summer, tomatoes should be picked when they are barely red and firm. They can continue to ripen indoors if they are kept in a cool and dark place. Do not place tomatoes in the refrigerator since the cold temperatures decreases their flavor. During cooler fall temperature of about 75 F, tomatoes can be left on the vine until ripe. Before the first frost, the tomato plant can be uprooted and hung upside down where fruit will continue to ripen. You may also harvest all green mature fruit, wrap them in paper individually and store them at 60-65 F. They will continue to slowly ripen over the next several weeks.

Here are some history facts to help you in Master Gardener's Trivia. Tomatoes were called "love apples". They are native to the Americas. When the conquistadors first brought them to Europe, people thought they were poisonous. Wealthy people at the time used flatware that contained lead. Foods high in acids, like tomatoes, would cause the lead to leech into the food causing sickness and even death. For this reason, only poor people ate them. Thomas Jefferson brought seeds and grew tomatoes at Monticello, but tomatoes did not become a kitchen staple until mid-1800s. Also, in the late 1800s, pizza was invented in Italy and you cannot have pizza without tomato sauce. Tomatoes are botanically fruits not vegetables! But in 1983, the US Supreme Court ruled that tomatoes were classified as vegetables so that tax could be collected for them.

And now the best part, eating tomatoes! Eating them raw is the best way to enjoy them; slice them into a sandwich, eat them as a snack, or toss them into a salad. If you prefer to cook them, nothing can beat a delicious home-made tomato sauce. Saute onions, garlic, and tomatoes; simmer on low heat until reduced to desired thickness. Blend well and enjoy your sauce on pizza or pasta.

Photos by Cecilia Bernuy

References

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