

The Lincoln County Master Gardener Association is grateful for your continued support of our community education mission. The following information will help provide you with the best opportunity for tomato gardening success.

## THE CARE AND FEEDING OF YOUR TOMATO PLANT

- HARDENING OFF - Your new tomato plant was grown by a Master Gardener in a greenhouse environment, protected from wind and direct sun. If you intend to grow your tomato plant outside, it will need to develop the cells on the stems and leaves to enable it to survive these elements. This is called "hardening off," and is a very important step in the growing process. BEFORE you plant your tomato in the garden, you need to gradually acclimate it to outside conditions for 7 -10 days. Gradual exposure helps your plants toughen up and reduces the possibility of injury. With proper hardening off they'll have an easier transition to the garden and will begin producing fruit sooner.
- Day #1, move your plant outside to a sheltered porch or other area with no direct sun or wind for 2 hours. Do not place on the ground where animals and insects can do damage.
- Every day add another hour or two to the schedule, gradually increasing the amount of time and exposure until you've moved it to its planting location.
- If we have a late frost, bring the plants indoors until the weather improves.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION - Tomatoes like sun and heat 8 hours per day (south facing bed). If the soil temperature regularly drops below 50, use soil warming methods such as plastic or a cloche.

### THE RIGHT HOME -

- In containers or a cloche - plant "determinate" DET. (bush) (dwarf) growth habit tomatoes. Use large containers with a drip tray to catch excess water.
- Plant "indeterminate" IND. (vining) tomatoes in raised or in-ground beds. Provide wide spacing; be sure to stake, or use tomato cages for support.

SOIL TESTING - If this is the first time you use a bed/garden area, soil testing is a good idea; it can be as in-depth as you choose, and is available from several different labs. At a minimum, it is good to test the soil pH, which measures the acidity and alkalinity of soil. You can perform this test with a home testing kit, available at garden/building centers. Nutrients are most available to tomatoes when the pH is 6.0 - 6.8. The coast soil tends to be acidic; lime will increase the soil's alkalinity. Your Extension Office can provide publications on this subject.

PREPARE SOIL - Soil should permit good drainage and easy root growth. Containers - use potting soil to avoid compaction. General bedding mixture formula: 70% top soil (potting soil for containers) 20% compost or other organic material, 10% amendments (fertilizer, lime, perlite, and coconut coir)

PLANTING YOUR TOMATO - When your tomato is "hardened off" and ready for planting, water the plant thoroughly. Dig a hole or trench twice as wide and deep as the plant base. Add water, compost, bone meal or fertilizer. Plant the tomato 'deep', at least to the lower leaves (remove leaves), to encourage more root development. Water plant thoroughly at the root level, never water overhead.

WATERING - Tomatoes like moderate, continuous moisture. Do not allow plant to dry out, or to become water logged. For raised and in-ground beds, it is best to do deep watering less frequently than shallow daily irrigation. Water should penetrate at least 3 inches. Potted tomatoes must be watered nearly every day; make sure water is penetrating.

FEEDING - If you prepared your bed (container) before planting with a balanced fertilizer, the soil will have enough nutrients until blossoming. If your pH is too low side-dress the plant with lime\*: Once a plant is established, apply a fertilizer with a higher phosphate number, e.g. 4-12-0 every 6 weeks to increase tomato production. When your tomato plant sets fruit, start a systematic fertilization program and feed every three weeks until frost. This can be an organic fertilizer, e.g. 4-6-3 or a diluted commercial fertilizer with similar proportions.

PRUNING - Too much foliage takes energy away from fruit production and prevents good air circulation. Throughout the growing season remove non-productive branches. (Branches that will not blossom.) Keep clippers clean; spray with 10% alcohol solution intermittently during process.

CHECK PLANT DAILY for changes or insects. Look for leaf discoloration, mold, fungus, and inspect the top and underneath of leaves for insects.

\*Use lime that does NOT contain dolomite, which can build up and become toxic.

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