

Fertilizing, Pruning and Propagating Tomatoes

By: Helen Willoughby-Peck

It has been a long, wet, cold spring. Not the best weather for growing tomatoes! But, if your plants are still alive they will soon be thriving and it will only be a month or so before you start to see the fruit of your labor. You will have so many tomatoes that you won't know what to do with them all. Hopefully, you won't be as bold as one of our seasoned Master Gardeners who tells a story that, many years ago, she and her husband didn't know how much to plant and overplanted their veggie crop. They were overwhelmed with produce. Their solution was to bag it and put it on the passenger seats of the autos with open windows parked along the curb downtown. You will be sharing the wealth, too.

It is not necessary to fertilize your tomato plants until flower and fruit set is well underway. Using fertilizer, particularly nitrogen before this will contribute to vigorous leaf growth and delay flowering. The lush leaves will also make the plants more attractive to insect pests. Apply nitrogen to the plants every 4-6 weeks once the plants have begun to set fruit. If you amended the soil with manure before planting, reduce the nitrogen fertilizer by one-half. More is not better when applying nitrogen as excessive application can leach into your groundwater. Also, now is the time to add a product that is high in calcium if you have had blossom end rot in past years. A great, inexpensive way to do this is by adding gypsum. Throw a few handfuls out around the tomato plants and water in.

Consistent and regular watering throughout the growing season are important. Fluctuations in water application can cause problems with blossom end rot. Too much watering after a dry spell can cause fruit splitting. Too little watering can weaken the plants and make them susceptible to pests and disease.

Mulching can be beneficial. Mulch after the ground has had a chance to warm up. It conserves water, keeps the soil cooler in hot weather, reduces competition from weeds and prevents soil born diseases from splashing up on to the plants. Straw, decomposed compost or newspaper pinned or weighed down or covered with bark are good choices.

Once the tomato plants are about 3 feet tall, remove the leaves from the bottom 6-12 inches of stem. These are usually the first leaves to develop fungus problems. They get the least amount of sun and soil born pathogens can be unintentionally splashed up onto them. This is especially important if you are growing heirlooms which can be more susceptible to disease.

You will get additional stems growing between the main stem and leaves. Pinch most of these off, leaving 1-3 stems to continue growing. This will reduce the weight of your plant and allow stronger production on the plant. In addition pinch and remove suckers that develop in the crotch joint of two branches. They won't bear fruit and will take energy away from the rest of the plant. But go easy on pruning the rest of the plant. You can thin leaves to allow the sun to reach the ripening fruit, but it's the leaves that are photosynthesizing and creating the sugars that give strength to your plants.

If only some of your tomatoes survived the cool spring, or you desire a friend's variety, now is the perfect time to take cuttings and get fruit from those cuttings this summer. Tomato plants are easy to propagate. So easy, in fact, that last year I took my stem prunings and put them directly into the ground in the dead heat of summer and had success, although it took significantly longer than if I had handled the cuttings correctly. If you want to ensure rapid success and a long period of fruit production from your cuttings, here is what you should do.

Take a six inch cutting from the tip of a stem. Remove all but the top 2-4 leaves. Using a 4 inch pot with sterile potting mix make a 2-3 inch hole and place the cutting into it at least deep enough to bury the nodes where leaves previously existed. Firm the soil around the cutting, water and place in a protected area out of direct sunlight for 1 week. After the first week, slowly expose the cutting to the early sun a little bit at a time starting with morning sun. After another week, your cuttings should be ready to plant outdoors.

For more information on growing tomatoes or for other home garden questions, call, or drop by the Master Gardener helpdesk on Tuesdays 9:00-12:00 or Thursdays 2:00-5:00, 5009 Fairgrounds Road, (209) 966-7078.

Our next article on growing tomatoes will cover some of the most common pests and diseases and what to do about them.

Mariposa Master Gardeners are pleased to be participating with The Mariposa Agi-Nature trail in presenting a special event this fall; Weekend in the Country – A Tomato Fest. Follow our tomato growing tips in upcoming columns and grow your own great tomatoes.