

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Thiessen January 30, 2025

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Tomato Tips

Tomatoes are one of the most popular vegetables for home gardeners. You can't beat the fresh taste of a home grown tomato picked straight from the garden. They are easy to grow, productive in small garden areas, and used in a wide variety of ways in the kitchen. Tomatoes require a location that is fairly fertile, well-drained, and sunny, getting at least a half day of sun or more.

If you plan to grow your own tomatoes from seeds, you need to start early. Tomato seeds are best started indoors and grown for four to eight weeks before transplanting them in the garden. You can plant tomato transplants in the garden after all danger of frost has passed, usually in early to mid- May. This means you would need to get your seeds started indoors towards the beginning of April, so they have enough time to grow into a healthy transplant before setting them in the garden. You may also choose to purchase transplants from garden centers.

When choosing what variety of tomato to plant there are many characteristics that should be considered. Look for varieties that are resistant to cracking and relatively early maturing (less than 75 days to maturity). Early maturing types will be more likely to set fruit before summer heat arrives. It may also be helpful to select varieties that are disease resistant.

Another characteristic to consider is the type of tomato plant best for your space. There are two types of tomato plants: determinate types and indeterminate types. Determinate tomatoes are sometimes called "bush" or "compact" plants. They typically stop growing at around three feet tall and produce a larger number of fruits during a more concentrated time period. They are a great choice if you have a small garden or want to grow in containers. Indeterminate types continue growing for the entire season which can result in very large, tall plants, usually five feet or taller. It's helpful to cage or stake all tomato plants, but indeterminate types will definitely need support.

When looking through a seed catalog, it may be overwhelming to try to pick the perfect tomato variety. K-State Research and Extension has a list of recommended vegetable varieties

that have been tested and proven to do well in Kansas's extreme weather conditions. You can pick up a copy of that list at your local Extension Office. K-State also completed a tomato and pepper variety trial last year. Some of the standout tomato varieties included Celebrity, Grand Marshall, Jetstar, Loki, and Florida 91.

When planting your tomato plants in the garden, space them at least 18 inches apart, but closer to 2 feet is best in the row. Allow 3-5 feet between each row, depending on the type of tomato you are planting. If possible, do not plant tomatoes in an area where they were planted in the past few years. Crop rotation helps to prevent disease. Tomato plants should be set in the ground slightly deeper than they grew in the original flat or pot. Place the stem of tall, spindly plants mostly below the soil surface and cover to the first leaf to keep them from breaking in spring winds. Tomatoes need consistent moisture so plan to water regularly. Deep watering encourages root development and increases tolerance to heat and drought later in the season. Water the roots of the plants and try to keep water off the leaves to help minimize disease.

Tomatoes and all garden plants benefit from mulching for many reasons. Organic mulch such as straw help provide even soil moisture, weed suppression, and reduce the spread of leaf disease. Tomatoes need nutrients to be productive but be careful not to overdo it. A soil test is the best way to determine nutrient needs.

Tomatoes will ripen on or off the vine when fruits are full sized and start to show a slight tinge of color. Harvesting early may help prevent cracking, fruit rot, and insect damage. Red pigments do not develop in temperatures over 95 degrees, therefore ripening off the vine is helpful.

Tomatoes are a fun plant to grow and can be used in so many recipes or eaten fresh right out of the garden. If you have tomato questions or troubles with your garden this season, call your local extension office for more resources.

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at cthiessen@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597). Find us online at www.postrock.ksu.edu