



Kevin Milaeger

# Milaeger's

## Tomatoes are Claustrophobic!

Kevin Milaeger

**At Milaeger's greenhouses,** our crew is constantly transplanting plants. (That is, replanting them in a larger pot, to ready them for sale.)

Sometimes two plants get put in a pot when there should have been only one. Later, on the sales lot, I sometimes see customers seeking out the "doubles." I presume they think they are getting a bonus plant. I don't blame them---who doesn't enjoy a freebie? But in the case of tomatoes, a double is undesirable. The plants could be separated, but that can be injurious to the roots, especially if the plants are well established. If left as is, they will be way too crowded. Better to choose a pot that has one plant. I am often asked what size containers should be used for growing tomatoes. At home I use 15 gallon pots, so that is what I recommend. The follow up question is "How many tomato plants can I put in there?"---the answer is "One." Seasoned gardeners know that most tomato plants get huge by summer's end. They don't



**Immature tomato roots**

like crowding---fruit production will be higher and there is less chance for disease when they are given plenty of room.

You are probably counting the days until you can plant your tomatoes and other heat loving plants. It is sensible to wait until night temperatures are above 50 degrees, and some even say 55. If you want to get your hands dirty I would suggest repotting (transplanting) your plants into larger pots. Experience has told me what a huge benefit that is. Transplanting is especially good for tomatoes. We sell most of our tomato plants in 3" pots. I just selected my personal plants and I repotted them into 7" pots. I set the plant directly on the bottom of the larger pot, and fill it up with soil; it is then about twice as deep as it was in the 3" pot. Someone new to gardening you might think I am planting the tomatoes too deep. If you examine a tomato plant that is, say, a foot tall, you will often find bumps at the base of the stem. These are the beginnings of



roots. If they come into contact with soil, they will develop into feeding



roots. When I plant the tomato twice as deep, I will get approximately twice as many roots feeding that plant. Doesn't that sound great? When you are finished transplanting, place the plants in a sunny spot and they will "root out" to the edge of the larger pot in no time. If the weather is warm, set them outside, but bring them back in if the temperature drops or if wind is excessive. Some folks set their plants on a wagon, and pull them in and out according to the weather. At the end of May, if the ten day weather forecast calls for all nights above 50, go ahead and plant. And don't forget to fertilize. I use two kinds of fertilizer. I like the organic Jobe's "Vegetable and Tomato" granular

fertilizer because of the added calcium, which helps control blossom end rot. I apply it shortly after I plant the tomatoes outside. I supplement that with the liquid "Algoflash for Tomatoes" several times over the growing season. Later, I reapply Jobe's.

Pepper plants are similar to tomatoes in their basic requirements. They need plenty of sunlight, a warm temperature before planting, and decent soil. Unlike tomatoes, they tolerate, maybe even thrive, when planted closely. If you are from Racine, you may know Dr. Mark DeCheck. He is a longtime close friend of the Milaeger family, and he is an avid gardener, to say the least. If you visit his office in summer, you will likely be greeted by an enormous bouquet of flowers. Mark plants his peppers "bedding style." (I grow onions the same way.) That means a wide row of four plants, with the plants spaced only about 8" apart. The next row has three plants, staggered from the first row---that is the most efficient method for high production. This pattern is repeated row after row for about 140'. Yes, you read that correctly---he grows over 800 pepper plants in that space. The close planting helps with plant support and the leaf cover keeps the bell peppers from getting sun scald--a common problem, especially in hotter summers. The funny part is that the good doctor doesn't even eat the hot peppers, which make up the larger part of his crop. He just enjoys growing them---a true plantsman. The garden bounty is given to friends.



**Set onions planted April 1st, bedding style**

In the trial garden at Milaeger's I put in just a row or two of peppers. That is usually plenty for me, and if I run out I know where I can get more. The trial garden is very exposed to wind, so I use a small cage around each



plant to protect them from breaking off, which sometimes happens late in the season when they are laden with large fruit. Also, the cages protect them from hoses.



**Vintage Veggie display**

This coming weekend is the final weekend of our Vintage Veggie program for this year. This is a very limited offering of interesting edible plants that are new to us. We grew about sixty varieties this year, with no more than 100 plants

of each. Some are already sold out---it's tough to predict which ones will be popular. [Here is a link](#) to a spreadsheet that shows what we grew this year. It's always fun to try something new. Of course, we'll be "growing out" all of these varieties, so you should be able to sample them all at Tomatomania---this year it is scheduled for Saturday, September 12, so mark your calendar!

Please email me ([kevin@milaegeers.com](mailto:kevin@milaegeers.com)) if you have any questions or comments.