

Most everyone likes a good tomato---it is

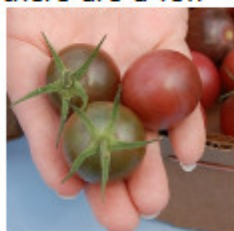
by far the number one plant in American vegetable gardens.



Gardeners usually have their favorite "tried and true" varieties, but we can't help but wonder why one would want to limit oneself to only a few varieties when the vast, exotic world of tomato varieties is waiting to be sampled. Wouldn't a true tomato lover want to try as many kinds as possible? At Milaeger's we are constantly trialing new types so we can add worthy varieties to our regular tomato list. This year we are growing over 80 varieties for our regular production. In addition, we are trialing over 30 new types. We will have some extra plants of these trial varieties, and they will be available on a very limited basis by May 15. Probably half these varieties are "heirloom" tomatoes. These are varieties from around the world that have been handed down for generations. In our own trial garden, we will be growing over 110 varieties, so that there will be plenty for our customers to sample at our TOMATOMANIA event, which is scheduled for Saturday, September 12.

Growing good tomatoes is not difficult, but there are a few important guidelines that must be followed.

One significant guideline that is regularly overlooked by overanxious beginners and impatient veteran gardeners is the planting date. Although April 26 is the average date of our last frost, keep in mind that tomato plants (and peppers too, for that matter) will not grow if the temperature is below 50



degrees F. In fact, they will become stunted if cool conditions persist. So, if you plant your tomato plants very early, and you are lucky enough to avoid frost, you will still be further behind the gardener who plants tomatoes at the end of May. The reason: In May, there are many nights (and maybe some days) in which the temperature ranges in the high 30's or the 40's. Plants subjected to those temperatures will become stunted in their effort to cope with the cold. (New growth appearing purplish is a symptom of this) If that happens, the wise gardener will replace those plants with new, fresh stock. The end of May is normally a safe time to plant tomatoes.

If one simply cannot wait to plant, we recommend the



following, or something similar to it. Transplant your newly acquired plants into larger pots. Plant a 3" tomato pot into a pot that is 8-10" wide. Plant the tomato deep, so that the soil covers a couple additional inches of the stem. (Additional roots will form on the newly covered stem. These new supplementary roots will essentially double the number of roots, and will help sustain the plant when it attains maturity.) Put the newly potted tomatoes on a cart and roll them outdoors only when the temperature is 50 or higher. If the weather is too cold, wheel them indoors near a sunny window. Once the temperatures are reliably over 50, plant them in the garden, or in their final, much larger container. This transporting plants indoors and out is more than a little trouble, especially for those with lots of plants. But it is the only way to start tomato plants early, short of having a greenhouse.

Planting tomatoes directly in the ground too early is simply a huge mistake and a waste of time and money. We urge new gardeners to follow this simple rule---plant tomatoes when night time temperatures are reliably over 50 degrees. We hate to see new gardeners suffer a garden defeat when their only mistake was being overly optimistic.

We are planning on more of these commentaries, as customer interest dictates and time permits. We welcome your comments or questions at gardenquestions@milaegers.com.