

The Winter Tomato Project

In an earlier blog I reported about my plan to grow a few tomato plants in the greenhouse this winter---I'm just as impatient as every other gardener! I thought you'd like to hear how that project is coming along. The tomato seed was planted the last week of December, 2011---about eleven weeks ago. I figured by the time the seed germinated and the resulting plants had some size to them, the days would be starting to get longer, and there would be enough sunlight for the plants. So far that seems to be working. The variety I am growing is the popular cherry tomato 'Supersweet 100.' I have eight plants, and each is in a 15 gallon pot. All are fitted with our largest tomato towers. As of March 15 the plants were all in the range of 50-55" tall, fairly bushy, and displaying their first flowers; some have set fruit. I believe there will be ripe fruit in ten days or so.



(Unpruned)

Much has been written about the how to prune tomatoes, or whether they should be pruned at all. It seems like most people follow the method that their parents used. I've tried a number of different methods and I haven't formed a definite opinion. Usually I prune until the first flower set, and then let the plant bush out. I think the added leaves gather more energy to support fruit production, and in the case of a really hot summer, the extra leaves can protect the fruit from sun scald. This time I plan to closely monitor the results. Hopefully I'll still be able to spend a few minutes a day with the plants once things get really busy here.

All I really want is a general feel for the merits of the various pruning methods---at least for cherry tomato plants.

I am trying several different growing methods, just for fun. There are three plants that are the "control" plants. They have had no pruning or any special care, except on two of them I removed some of the lower branches for better air circulation. On three other plants, the axils (suckers) have been removed. I did this several times, but I will stop now that the plants are flowering. For the last two plants I decided to try the "dual stem" method. This is where one of the lower axils is allowed to develop and become a second main stem, the goal being increased production. I removed all other axils on these two "dual stem" plants. However, as with the other group, I've stopped pruning now that flowering has commenced. On all but one of the plants (one of the "control" plants) I removed all the lower branches for better air circulation. Disease often starts in the soil, so I like to remove the lowest vegetation. On all except the one plant, the first stems now start at about 12" off the soil.



(Dual Stem)



At Milaeger's, like at most commercial greenhouses, we fertilize with a method known as "constant liquid feed." A large batch of fertilizer solution is made, and is "injected" into the water supply at a prescribed rate. Since we are growing many different kinds of plants, the fertilizer has to be well balanced, to cover the basic needs of all plants. If any group of plants requires special fertility treatment, it is applied separately. Our current fertilizer analysis, in case you are curious, is 15-3-18, and the rate is 175 ppm (parts per million). This is a custom blend for our particular well water, and suited to our specific crops. It is not available "off the shelf," and even if it were, it would not be suitable for anyone other than our greenhouses.

In addition to the liquid fertilizer, I added some "Dr. Earth's Tomato Vegetable and Herb Organic Fertilizer" to the soil about a week ago. I felt the foliage should have been a little darker green. According to the label, this fertilizer should have been applied at the time of planting, so it won't be a truly fair test of the product, but I think it will still help the plants. The "Dr. Earth" fertilizer takes about ten days to activate, so I'll see if there is any change in the leaf color and growth rate fairly soon.

These winter tomatoes are growing at the east end of our "Dutch" greenhouse (at the south end of the Racine greenhouse complex). If you'd like to stop in and take a look, please feel free to do so. In the coming weeks they will be joined by another tomato variety and a couple of pepper varieties that are new to us this year, but they are all about eight weeks behind the 'Supersweet 100's.'