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Tips for tending to your tomato garden

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Heritage tomatoes grow in a vegetable garden in Cobb. Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat

July is the month in Sonoma and Napa counties when gardeners typically start to experience water challenges.

- Check to make sure all irrigation systems are working, and drip lines have not been disturbed by pets or wildlife.
- Closely monitor fruit and shade trees, shrubs, and perennials planted within the last year. Newly planted perennials have small root systems and are vulnerable in drought and low water conditions. Check soil moisture regularly to prevent dehydration.
- Water your plants early in the morning while it's still cool. This practice reduces evaporation and moisture loss, ensuring plants receive as much of the water as possible. Additionally, morning watering allows the plants to dry off before

right overhead sun exposure, thus reducing the risk of sunburn. Correctly irrigated plants are less susceptible to pests and diseases.

- Weeds are usually more vigorous than flowers and will rob plants of water and nutrients. Remove weeds regularly, especially before they produce seed.



A bird takes a bath in a Fiore Quadrate three-tier fountain at Absolute Home and Garden in Sebastopol. Alvin Hornada / The Press Democrat 2018

Provide a shallow water source, such as a bird bath, for thirsty birds and bees. Place some rocks and stones along the edges so insects can reach the water without risk of drowning. Floating a piece of corkboard in water is another option to give bees a safe landing spot to drink.

Tomato tips

Now that your tomatoes are planted and basking in full sun, optimally 6-8 hours a day, here are a few tips to encourage abundant good-quality fruit and to keep the plants healthy and disease-free.

- Support plants with stakes or cages to lift vines off the ground, control their spread, keep foliage dry and fruit clean.
- Prune stems, if desired, to manage excess vining and encourage larger fruit size.

- For the highest yields, add mulch around the plants 3 to 4 inches from the stem. A two- to three-inch layer of organic material such as compost or rice straw helps suppress weeds and retain soil moisture.
- To flourish, tomato plants need regular irrigation to a depth of 1 inch per week during the growing season. Plants in containers may need more frequent watering. Avoid overhead watering and keep foliage dry to prevent fungal diseases. Keep the soil around new plants moist, but not soggy, for the first 3-4 weeks. Drip irrigation is most efficient.
- When tiny tomatoes start appearing, water less to minimize further vegetative plant growth. Water established plants when the top 2 to 3 inches of the soil are dry. Consistent watering helps prevent fruit cracking and blossom end rot. You can test soil moisture by poking your finger or a chopstick into the ground.
- It's tempting to fertilize tomato plants right away to encourage growth. Fertilizing too early, however, or with high-nitrogen fertilizer promotes more leafy growth and may actually delay fruit set. Feeding them too much nitrogen can also attract aphids and whiteflies. Wait until fruit starts to develop, then fertilize with fish emulsion, kelp, or another natural fertilizer. Apply additional fertilizer every month.
- Hand pick any worms or insects that may appear.
- Tomatoes set fruit only when night temperatures are above 55 degrees. Lycopene, the pigment that gives tomatoes their red color, is only produced with temperatures between 50 and 85 degrees. If the weather is extremely hot, you can pick tomatoes before they are completely ripe and bring them out of direct sunlight to ripen. They only need warmth, not light, to ripen.
- Tomatoes are ripe when they give slightly when squeezed lightly. You should be able to easily pull a ripe tomato off the vine. A soft tomato is too ripe for slicing, but you can add it to sauces. Store tomatoes in a cool place, as close to 60 degrees as possible. Storing tomatoes in the refrigerator reduces their flavor and turns them mushy.

Common tomato problems

One of the most frustrating tomato-growing issues is poor fruit set, when an apparently healthy tomato plant is repeatedly not producing tomatoes. There can be several causes:

Temperature: Depending on the variety, fruit set may fail after several days of nighttime temperatures below 55 degrees, or when daytime temperatures exceed 90 degrees. Fruit set failure due to cold weather might be improved with fruit-setting hormones available in retail nurseries, but they will not help during hot weather.

Light: Fruit set may fail when sunlight is inadequate. Tomato plants require at least 6 hours of sunlight per day.

Fertilizer: Applying high concentrations of nitrogen fertilizer causes plants to grow lush, leafy growth but will significantly delay flowering and fruit set. Wait until the first

fruit is set to give plants some extra nitrogen fertilizer and apply every 4-6 weeks thereafter.

Observe and plan

As garden work lessens in July, it's a good time to observe and plan.

Many gardeners take a notebook and pen and look around the garden, making a list of plants pleasing for their color and location and those that are not.

Note particularly successful combinations that deserve to be repeated elsewhere in the garden when new planting begins in fall. This slight lull in maintenance chores allows time for long-range planning.

Contributors to this week's column were Diane Judd and Debbie Westrick. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.