

TOMATO TIME

The new seasons tomato plants are now coming available from your garden centre and now is a good time to start off an early tomato plant or two. The earlier the start the earlier the first ripe fruit.

The best advise is to plant out, or pot up, a couple of tomato plants every month for the next six or seven months. By doing this you can have a continuous supply of ripe fruit right through till winter sets in. Early season and late season tomato plants are best grown in containers so they can be moved around to protect against the elements. In between these two times the plants can be planted in open ground.

This would be from about September or October (dependant on local conditions) through till about December/January and then into containers for the late fruiting plants.

Container planted tomatoes should be planted in a rich compost that is friable and contains a good amount of animal manure such as chook manure. A good tomato plant food is important and you may like to use my own called **Wally's Secret Tomato Food**. It contains all the elements that the tomatoes need including adequate potash and magnesium for best flavored fruit.

Choose a good site for your tomato plants; it should be in a very sunny area that gets all day sun if possible. Against a wall or fence is also ideal as this will give reflected light and heat.

When planting tomatoes out, make a deeper hole so that the whole of the stem up to the first leaves are buried. The plants have the ability to 'root up' the whole stem and this creates a greater root system allowing the plants to feed better and grow faster.

Tall growing types need stakes or wire supports and should be tied to the support with old nylon stockings or similar material. Laterals or side shoots should be pinched out as soon as they are big enough to do so.

Once the weather conditions become warmer watch out for the tomato caterpillar and white fly as they can do a lot of damage to the fruit and plant.

Place **Neem Tree Granules** near the base of the plants about every 6 weeks to reduce these pest problems. Ensure that the ground is kept evenly moist as uneven watering causes blossom end rot.

When growing tomatoes in glasshouses try to ensure even temperatures to prevent tops of the plant from curling.

Tomato plants use a great deal of energy as they produce foliage and fruit, and the effects of failing to remove laterals are easily seen on larger varieties such as beefsteak tomatoes.

When the laterals are allowed to grow, the fruit produced will be smaller than if the laterals had been removed, leaving only a few fruiting trusses.

Removing the laterals allows the energy to be directed into the fruit rather than the foliage. You can choose which way you want to go, or you can decide to follow a combination of both.

Gardeners do need to be aware, however, that there is a danger of disease entering the plant when you remove laterals. Most often it is botrytis, which causes a collar rot somewhere on the main trunk of the plant. When the disease starts on the trunk, the top

foliage will droop during the day only to recover towards evening. As the disease progresses, you will notice that the tops won't recover late in the day, and the plant will eventually wilt and die.

The disease will make itself apparent with the development of a darker area on the trunk - that is where the rot will be happening, blocking the flow of moisture and nutrients from the roots. Little bumps of aerial roots will often appear just above the rot area. If there is foliage below the part where the rot starts, particularly if it is producing laterals, then you can cut the top off and allow the good part to continue growing.

The chances are you will avoid this disease completely if you don't remove any laterals, and if the plant succeeds in avoiding any damage arising from being rubbed on a stake or something similar. One of the ways to prevent any problems is to remove the laterals when they are very small, which means checking the plant every day or two.

Remove them only on warm days when there is low humidity, and spray the cut area immediately afterwards with **Wally's Liquid Copper**. You can make up a solution of this product in a 250ml trigger spray bottle, and it will keep for some time. Just remember to shake the bottle before spraying.

Removing older leaves might also make the plant vulnerable to disease. This is another job which should be done only in conditions of low humidity, and always remember to spray to protect. Humidity levels will often be much higher in a glasshouse, which means special care must be taken to open up the greenhouse and remove some of the air moisture before taking off the laterals.

Last season a gardener told me how he overcame the collar rot problem by applying undiluted **Liquid Copper** with a paint brush to the area as the rot was developing. This may work if you are quick enough to spot the problem.

Blights can be a problem in early and late season times and these are;

Early blight: Finding small spots turning to a dark mould on older leaves will indicate the presence of this problem. It occurs in warm wet weather, but plants can be protected with a monthly spray of **Perkfection**. If you know the disease recurs in your garden, give additional sprays of **Wallys Liquid Copper and Raingard** every 10 to 14 days over all the foliage and stems.

Late blight: Here, you will notice brown, irregular patches on the plant's stem and leaves. This problem is particularly bad in cool humid weather, and it can be controlled using the same methods as for controlling early blight. If you have not applied **Perkfection** and the disease strikes, spray the affected plants immediately with **Perkfection** at 10ml per litre of water. Add to this 3.5ml of **Liquid Copper per litre**, with **1ml of Raingard per litre**, and spray the plants for total coverage of the foliage.

Two weeks later, reapply just the **Liquid Copper and Raingard**, then after another fortnight, apply the same again with **Perkfection** at 5ml per litre. That program will normally be sufficient to see the problem off, but if either blight returns, re-start the spray program. Late blight is common later in the season, but under the right conditions will strike in the spring. Potatoes and pepinos are also affected by this disease, but you can give them a similar level of protection using the same sprays as outlined here.

Happy and hopefully a successful tomato growing season.

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