

Wally's Weekly News 8<sup>th</sup> August 2009  
Written by Wally Richards.

### TOMATOES FOR THE NEW SEASON

Now that we are into August, it is the right time to start thinking about tomatoes for the new season.

The traditional time for planting tomatoes outdoors in many parts of New Zealand is around Labour Weekend which is about 10 odd weeks away.

That does not mean that you have to wait till then to buy a few plants for the garden.

Tomato plants planted out in Labour Weekend are unlikely to produce ripe fruit till early in the New Year except for a few quick maturing types such as the Sweet One Hundreds.

On the other hand if you were to start now with seeds you are likely to have plants with fruit on by Labour Weekend and have ripe tomatoes before Xmas.

Garden Centres are likely to have a few varieties of tomato plants about now including the first of the Supertomatoes and that even puts you further ahead for possible ripe fruit say about November.

Gardeners that are fortunate in having a glasshouse can sow some seeds and buy a couple of plants for growing on.

For those that do not have a glasshouse there is no reason that you can not get an early start as well, it just takes a little more care.

Let us look at how to go about this without a glasshouse but similar applies to glasshouse owners.

Purchase a packet of tomato seeds from your garden centre and one that I would recommend is Silvery Fir Tree which is a Russian tomato that is a dwarf type, an excellent producer of nice size fruit and its cold tolerant as well. The seeds can be found on Niche Seed Stands in some garden centres.

I have grown this tomato for a couple of years and they are perfect in a 20 litre container only growing about half a metre tall and very bushy with lots of small to medium size fruit.

It is a plant which you do not remove laterals, you just let it grow.

The first thing to do is germinate a few seeds and this can be done in an old punnet or cell pack.

Fill the punnet with a good potting mix to about two thirds full then place say 6 seeds nicely apart or one seed per cell on top of the mix.

Next spray the seeds with a solution of **Magic Botanic Liquid** (MBL) at 20mls per litre of non chlorinated water, so that the seeds and the mix are nicely wet.

Cover the seeds lightly with either a little more mix or alternatively use sand or fine pumias.

Spray the surface to moisten. The seedling tray can now be placed onto a heat pad (if you have one) or alternatively in a warm room for germination. Every day spray the surface to keep it moist.

Dependant on the amount of warmth will determine when the first show of foliage appears.

Once a show of foliage appears the seedling tray needs to be moved to a spot outside that is sunny but sheltered from frosts.

The easy way to do this is to take an old drawer and place the tray inside it with a sheet of

glass over to cover. If it looks like there maybe a frost, place a sheet of cardboard over the glass with some stones to hold it in place or alternatively place the cardboard under the glass for the night. Remember next morning to remove the cardboard.

Other punnets of vegetable seedlings can also be placed inside the drawer for early plantings.

Mist the young plants every day or two to keep the mix moist. Do not over water.

When the plants have established their true leaves (the first leaves are the embryo leaves from germination) then you can wet down the tray and carefully lift the young plants out without disturbing the roots and damaging them.

They are now ready to go into their first small pot which should be no wider than about 50mm and up to 70mm tall use good compost as the new growing medium. A little of my own **Secret Tomato Food with Neem Tree Granules** can be applied to the surface of the compost but not against the trunk of the plant. If your drawer is deep enough the small pots can be placed back inside with the glass to cover.

If there is not sufficient height then place the pots in a sunny spot and protect from frost. You may want to move them indoors or onto a covered porch or into a shed overnight when it looks like a frost. They should also be protected against cold wind and rain during the day.

The secret is to keep the mix just a little moist and certainly not wet as it will make it colder for the plants.

When the plants get up to about 100mm tall in their pots then it is about time to repot them into a 120mm pot using compost once again. When you transplant them this time, you will bury the plants deeper, up to about their first set of leaves. This then allows the plant to root up the mix covered trunk increasing the amount of roots to nourish the young plants. Apply a little more **tomato food** and spray the plants every couple of weeks with **MBL**. The above last part would also apply to tomatoes purchased in punnets, cell trays or Supertoms which come in a smaller pot.

When your plants reach about 200mm tall then repot them into 200 to 250mm pot.

At this time you will likely have the first trusses of flowers and the beginning of fruit set. Allow the plant to grow on to about 500mm tall and then if conditions are favorable they can be planted outdoors with protection or repotted into a 20 litre container for dwarf type plants or into a 50 litre or larger container for tall growing types, as their final home. When repotting wet the mix down first and transplant without disturbing the root system by tapping the edge of the pot on a bench to remove while supporting the plant with your other hand.

Apply more **tomato food with Neem Granules** at each transplant time.

A problem arose last season in some areas with a pest called the potato/tomato psyllids, these insects suck on the stems and leaves of the plant and release a toxin which prevent the fruit from growing much larger than a marble in both tomatoes and potatoes.

My possible solution for overcoming the problem is to use the **Neem Tree granules** around the root zone on the growing medium and to place more about every 6 weeks.

Spray the granules and the plant all over with **Neem tree Oil** every two weeks with **MBL** added and once we are into summer fully, spray with the same every week.

In the early part of the season there should not be a problem until the pests start to appear, as the weather warms up. Once their populations start to build, then regular sprays will need to be used.

The same applies to your potato crops.

A monthly spray of **Perkfection** will assist in preventing diseases.

When removing laterals or any leaves spray the wound immediately with a solution of **Liquid Copper** to prevent disease entering the plant.

Lets hopefully look to a good season and lots of fresh home grown tomatoes, they certainly taste far better than the purchased ones.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)