Florida Gardeners Get a Second Chance at Tomatoes

Tom MacCubbin University of Florida IFAS Extension - Orange County

“Growing tomatoes has become somewhat of a sport - you start with little bitty plants and in a few months you get large plants with fruits,” says Linda Sapp owner of the Tomato Growers Supply Company in Fort Meyers. “It’s like magic in a way.”

Most people have a good time growing tomatoes. Sapp says they love to both eat them and give them away.

“There is nothing like picking your own tomatoes. Almost everyone likes them,” says Jim Hunter owner of South Seminole Farm and Nursery in Casselberry. “Even those who don’t like tomatoes often grow a few of the big guys that wow gardeners.”

Hunter explains one of those big guys is the ever popular ‘Beefsteak’ variety with a slightly contorted look that often produces fruits weighing a pound or more. The plants need staking and the fruits are often susceptible to worms but it’s a favorite due to it’s size.

Another favorite for it’s overall yields and sweet taste is the cherry type tomato, says Hunter. These are heat and pest tolerant -- the vines just keep on producing.

Florida gardeners can get a bonus of a late summer through fall tomato season but you have to start on time. Setting transplants in the garden begins in mid August and should be completed by early September to have fruits ready to eat before the colder fall weather arrives.

If you are a tomato connoisseur you are not going to settle for just any variety. You probably want that tomato with the northern taste.

“I hear it all the time - the tomatoes have better flavor up north,” says Jay Scott tomato breeder with the University of Florida Gulf Coast Research and Education Center in Wimauma. Scott says taste is a matter of perception and the difference is difficult to tell scientifically.
“Home grown tomatoes probably do have a better taste. They are ready to eat when picked compared to a shipping tomato that is less ripe. The sugar content is also a little higher in the home picked fruits.”

Tomatoes can be categorized by their size, shape and color. There are hundreds of varieties to choose from but some sure to grow types and favorites suggested by our tomato producing experts are listed below.

- **Standard:** Tomatoes with a more traditional shape and red color that weigh in between 6 and 12 ounces. They are often further classified as early, mid and late season due to the time it takes the vines to ripen the first edible fruit from planting which varies between 55 and 85 days. Some popular varieties include ‘Better Boy’, ‘Big Beef’, ‘Celebrity’, ‘First Prize’ and ‘Solar Set’.

- **Beefsteak:** Large growing plants producing mainly red fruit weighing up to two pounds. All need good support to bear their crops. Some favorites include ‘Beefsteak’, ‘Brandywine’, ‘Burpee’s Supersteak’, ‘Delicious’ and ‘Giant Belgium’.

- **Small fruited:** Tomatoes produced on foot tall to high growing vines. The fruits are often referred to as cherry or grape tomatoes due to their rounded to oblong shape. Many seem to be pest resistant and early producers that bear over a period of several months. Varieties to plant include ‘Grape Tomato’, ‘Jolly Hybrid’, ‘Juliet’, ‘Sweet Chelsea’, ‘Sweet 100’ and ‘Sweet Million’.

- **Orange, yellow, green and white fruited:** A collection of tomatoes of varying size fruits and plants. Many gardeners prefer the colored fruits for their unique look and flavor. Many feel these varieties have a less acid taste. Some you might grow include ‘Black Cherry’, ‘Persimmon’, ‘Snow White’ and ‘Sun Gold’.

Just a few tomato plants usually yield all the fruit a family can eat but you have to begin the planting with good soil preparation in a spot receiving six or more hours of sun. Florida soils are mainly sand and Jim Hunter recommends gardeners add liberal quantities of organic matter including peat moss, compost and manures to the sites. He also suggests gardeners have a soil acidity test made to ensure the proper pH. He says, just the addition of needed lime can help prevent one common tomato problem called blossom end rot.

Plantings also need regular feedings but not too much nitrogen, says Jay Scott. He recommends a low nitrogen and high potassium fertilizer such as might be found in a 4-6-8 or similar analysis found at local garden centers. He says too much nitrogen affects fruit set and quality. A once a month feeding should be adequate but gardeners could also reduce the amount by half and feed every other week. Many gardeners like to use manures following a similar schedule.

Scott says gardeners could also use slow release fertilizers and may be able to reduce feedings to once or twice a season following label instructions.

Tomatoes prefer a moist soil. Linda Sapp recommends applying the water to the soil and not the leaves in order to prevent disease. Water daily until the plants begin to root into the surrounding
soil. Also apply a mulch to stretch the time between waterings. She says an established growing tomato plant needs water about every 3 to 4 days.

Another tip from Jay Scott is to reduce the watering as the fruits begin to ripen. Water just enough to keep the plants from wilting and support some growth. This trick helps the plants store sugar in the fruits and may improve flavor.

In most cases it’s easy to tell when a tomato is ripe - just wait until the fruits begin to change color. But what about varieties that are green or light colored when ripe?

“Apply thumb pressure to the skin,” says Linda Sapp. “It yields when ripe.” Otherwise when the color of most varieties change to pink, orange or red it’s time to harvest.

“Ready to eat tomatoes taste so good,” says Sapp. “You really can’t buy them in a supermarket like you can grow them at home.”