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Home and Gardening

A pro's tips for wrangling tomatoes

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By KAREL HOLLOWAY

Special Contributor

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What do most folks want from their vegetable gardens? Tomatoes.

They want lush, healthy vines with round, red tomatoes

hanging in bunches ready for picking.

Alas, it's not that easy. And no matter what else you do, if you want to pick your own tomatoes this summer you had better get them in the ground now.

This year's winter months have messed up the usual tomato-planting timeline. At least one retail nursery, North Haven Gardens in North Dallas, is pulling tomato plants off its tables after this weekend, says Leslie Finical Halleck, its general manager. Area Calloway's Nursery locations will sell transplants for a few more weeks, says Kimberly Bird, marketing vice president.

The Dallas area's last average frost date is March 17, based on meteorological records. The usual timetable for setting out tomato starts here, according to Texas AgriLife Extension, is March 25 to April 15. If we have seen our last frost for spring 2012 (but don't rule out the Easter cold snap), it was in February. Day and night temperatures play a huge role in tomatoes' fruit production, and hot weather is ruinous.

So what's a gardener to do?

It takes a lot of forethought, preparation, timing, skill and luck, says John Hunt, a Dallas County master

gardener.

Over 20 years of gardening, Hunt has become an expert in tomato cultivation. He can give you detailed directions for checking soil temperature; planting at just the right moment; caging; fertilizing; and warding off insects and disease. He also can provide tips for less intensive gardening that is likely to yield a decent crop without as much attention.

Community gardens ask his advice, garden clubs are eager for his tomato talk, radio and television stations call for quick spots, and he writes columns for local publications.

“Yeah, I guess you could call me the Tomato Guy,” Hunt says.

He loves tomatoes: the science of them, the serendipity of them. Ask the simplest question and the 65-year-old lights up. He launches into a detailed answer and will give you the science behind his methods.

He readily admits that growing the perfect tomato is not that simple. In fact, the whole idea can be daunting.

Take the best time for planting, for instance. Hunt grew

up in Wisconsin, and tomato growing there is much more laid-back. Put the plants in the ground in late April or May and wait to pick them, he says.

Not so with the muggy heat of North Texas.

“The key is you’ve got March, April and May,” he says. The ground doesn’t get warm enough until March and by June, it can be too hot for fruit to set properly.

“The window is closing to get transplants in the ground,” Hunt says. “But it all depends on what kind of temperatures we get in the next 60 days. As temps go up, fruit set goes down. We need temps like we have had last week and this (optimum 60 F to 85 F). As the season goes on, production will diminish with rising temps. The end of March is not the end of the planting opportunities, but ideal planting time is fading fast.”

As if unpredictable temperatures were not difficult enough, the soil around here isn’t great, so it must be amended with lots of compost.

Then there’s planting, fertilizing, watering and protecting the ripening fruit.

Hunt has a lot of horticulture credentials: master

gardener, past president of the First Dallas Men's Garden Club and landscape consultant.

But he credits much of his knowledge to his late mentor, John Walls. For Walls, growing tomatoes was an art form. Hunt still uses a video of Walls from the late '90s aired by a public television station as part of his presentation.

If you want the very best crop (Walls regularly got about 1,000 pounds of tomatoes from his suburban backyard) it's a lot — a *lot* — of work.

Hunt recommends putting down black or red plastic in February to bring the soil temperature up.

Plant early and protect the plants with purchased covers or recycled 1-gal. plastic milk jugs with one end sliced off. Invert the jug over a young tomato plant to provide greenhouse-like conditions and to protect the tender transplants from insects and nibbling mammals.

Even though he teaches classes on organic gardening, Hunt recommends a little commercial tomato food in the bottom of each planting hole to give the plants a quick shot of nutrients. He also works in a little sugar and Epsom salts for the same reason. Water when dry.

Use seaweed and compost tea to fertilize.

Watch for signs of insect or disease problems and attack them early. There are many websites and books with excellent advice, he says. He also gives recommendations in his classes.

With good soil, just the right amount of sun and fortuitous weather, you'll have enough to eat and give away.

If this much effort sounds beyond your means, don't despair. There are easier ways.

A hardy transplant stuck in soil amended with decent compost, fertilized occasionally and watered regularly usually will yield some pretty good tomatoes, Hunt says. Or just get a big bag of good potting mix, poke some holes in one side and turn it over. Cut an X in the plastic near one end and another at the other end. Put a tomato plant in each hole, water and watch them grow.

This method will not necessarily produce prize winners, Hunt says, but you're likely to get the homegrown taste you're longing for.

Karel Holloway is a Terrell freelance writer.

What kind of tomato?

Hunt recommends medium-size tomatoes such as 'Early Girl' or 'Celebrity' and small tomatoes such as 'Porter' or cherry tomatoes. In his own garden this year, he planted 'Roma,' 'Sweet 100,' and a yellow pear.

Other tips:

- Plant your tomatoes now. The soil is warm and the nights are cool.
- If you must keep transplants for more than a week, repot them in at least a gallon container until you can put them in the garden.
- Don't over- or under-water. Check soil by sticking a finger about 2 inches down; if it's dry, water.
- Use mulch to keep the ground cool on hotter days, preserve water, deter weeds and help keep soil-borne disease from the plant.

- Pick fruits before they are fully ripe. A red tomato is just too tempting for birds.

Plan your life

Hunt's next presentation is 10 a.m. Saturday at Richardson's Project Eden Community Garden, 1600 E. Campbell Road. The public is welcome.



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