Fall Tomatoes

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In most gardens the tomato crop was spectacular this spring. All the recommended varieties and even some of the heirloom selections had high yields. Until the last two weeks most of us were not bothered by fungus or spider mites. Birds seemed to be the most challenging threat to the high yields.

If you have not done it yet, now is the time to pull the spring plants out in favor of making room for the fall planting. Yield has dropped off and the pests have moved in. In fact when you pull the old plants carefully stuff them in garbage bags for disposal unless you have a compost pile at least 200 feet from the vegetable garden. The developing spider mite populations can transfer to the new planting if they are discarded close to the new plants.

Don’t be sentimental, you have a great affection for the spring plants but research indicates that you have overall better results if you plant a new fall crop. Harvest any of the fruit on the old plants that has changed from green to white or orange. They will finish ripening better on the kitchen counter than sitting on the old plants in 95 degree heat.

Prepare the soil by working in 2 inches of compost and 5lbs (10 cups) of slow release lawn fertilizer such as 19-5-9 per 100 sq. ft. of bed.

Select your transplants so they can be planted before the end of July. The plants can manage the heat as long as they are planted in well-drained soil and are well-watered.

 By the time the spider mite population has found the new transplants, temperatures will have started to drop and their reproduction rate will be limited. To contribute to their control apply neem oil and /or seaweed extract to the undersides of the leaves every week. The break in tomato production will also temporarily distract the birds in favor of anaqua, persimmon, and Chinese pistache berries, but have the bird netting ready just in case.

It will be fun selecting the varieties to plant this year. Solar Fire, Tycoon, Valley Cat, and BHN 368 are all heat setters so they should be considered. Red Deuce the 2016 Rodeo tomato was hugely successful this spring producing large flat tomatoes on a relatively small plant but it is untested as an autumn producer. It deserves to be planted as a test.

Last year area gardeners had good production well before cold weather arrived if they used the special Roma Surprise and Surefire transplants promoted by Dr. Parsons and his research cooperators. They will be available this year again along with the new tomato with the preliminary name of “Lavaca” that was selected and is being grown by a home gardener in Lavaca County. Dr. Parsons stated that the Lavaca is a mid-size tomato like Surefire but has better taste than Surefire or Roma.

If you have room for 6 tomato plants one option might be to plant a Tycoon, a BHN968, and a Red Deuce along with one each of the fast maturing Roma Surprise, Surefire, and Lavaca. The BHN 968, Roma Surprise, Surefire and Lavaca will all mature fruit quickly to beat the first freeze. If the weather stays mild over a long season or if you can protect the plants from the first freeze, the Tycoon and Red Deuce will be able to produce some larger fruit.