

Fall Tomatoes

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Last year the fall tomato crop was very promising and then we experienced the November 14, record freeze. All that remained after the cold weather was a few green tomatoes that were sheltered enough not to freeze solid. It is time to try it again this year!

We plant a separate tomato crop in the spring and one in the fall because we have two blocks of tomato growing weather bordered by an excessively hot period in mid-summer and, of course, some cold weather in mid-winter.

The spring tomato growing season is approximately March 15 until July 1. Our fall tomato season is from about July 21 until the first freeze which is often at the end of November after Thanksgiving.

If you are going to take advantage of the fall tomato growing season, it means that it is time to pull your spring plants. Ideally you will relegate the plants to the compost pile. Tomatoes do not produce good sized blemish free fruit in the deep summer heat, and in many gardens, more spider mites and fungal disease symptoms are produced than fruit.

Spider mites are small pests that inhabit the bottom of the tomato leaves and make their living by sucking the juices from the plant. In hot weather the generation time of spider mites may only be 3 days! The tiny individual mites can be difficult to see but the result of their activity can be very visible. The leaf color fades so the plant looks dusty and eventually the foliage becomes covered with webs.

If your spring plants are infected with spider mites, it is best not to put the pulled plants in the compost pile. Carefully put them in a garbage bag and in the garbage. We say "carefully" because you don't want to leave large numbers of adult mites on site ready to infect the new fall plants. That can happen if the compost pile is close or you knock off lots of the pests in the process of removing the old plants.

To produce well, tomatoes need to be planted in full sun. After you pull the spring plants, prepare the garden for the fall tomato plants by applying 2 inches of compost and 10 cups of a slow release lawn fertilizer such as 19-5-9 per 100 sq. ft. of bed. Tomato cages keep the ripening fruit off the ground. A spacing that works well is one with 3 feet between plants.

In the fall just like the spring it is best to plant a tomato variety that is determinate or semi-determinate. The term refers to a characteristic to some selections of tomato that grow quickly to full size and then concentrate on setting fruit. An indeterminate variety will often just keep adding foliage and does not set fruit in time to beat the hot, or in the fall, the cold weather. Very large plants are produced but only a limited amount of fruit.

Seek out the 2019 Rodeo tomato HM 8849 for a quick producer of large fruit. Tycoon, Phoenix, Valley Cat, Celebrity, 444, BHN 968, and Roma all should be available. Tycoon, BHN 968, Celebrity and Valley Cat are fast producing selections that are also nematode resistant.

As the summer progresses the nights will become cooler and spider mites should be less of a threat, but it also helps to apply a preventive spray made up of 2 tablespoons of seaweed extract in 1 gallon of

water. Spray it under the leaves once per week. Bt products work well to control caterpillars. Follow label instructions.