

I had quite a few requests for some planting instructions, so I thought I might pass along some info. This is simply what I do in my garden ....I do not profess to be an expert gardener...wouldn't we all just about stand on one foot, touch our nose, and talk to our plants.....if we thought it helped? I am simply a good tomato baby, babysitter! (...and yes, they talk back....)

Whenever you are planting a garden, you should label your plants so you know your likes and dislikes for the next year. I use a paper hole puncher on my hard plastic markers and just hang them from the tomato cages. Old mini-blinds and cheap plastic silverware are wonderful markers! Mark them however will be easy to see later. Check your "permanent" marker to make sure it will tolerate water. Some on the market are not permanent as labeled. Also, draw yourself a "garden plan" or "map"....this will help you plan your area as well as provide great referencing for 2015 picks!

After I had the tomato plants (addiction).....before I had a rototiller, and tiller friends.....I would dig a hole deep and wide. Maybe 18" x 18". Tomato plant roots are very lazy. They want the soil loose. I put a shovel full of composted manure in the bottom 25% of the hole and mix with dirt. They will find it when their roots are more mature. Throughout the years, I have adopted the good 'nuff trench method used by many seasoned gardeners. This is where they lay the plant down in a shallow trench, covering its stem long ways. If you use this method, just make sure they are deep enough to maintain moisture....maybe 4"-6"and that you still have the ground under them loose so the new roots can spread nicely.

Tomato plants should be planted with only a small portion of foliage above ground. Aim to bury at least 1/3 to 1/2 the plant's stem in the ground, plucking off any branches in the way. This will create a larger, thicker, sturdier stem and also protect the plant from Spring winds until it gets its roots in the ground to keep it stable. The main stem will put out new roots along the portion that goes underground and remains moist. This gives them a deep root system, and custom grown roots for YOUR soil. Their stem will grow much thicker after it has been planted deep this way.

I give them Miracle Grow at transplant. They had this once in their lives already when they were transplanted here. You can follow the directions on the box....typically, you give every two weeks. Now, during transplanting, you want to pour it over their leaves too. Tomato plants will intake nutrients through their foliage. Basically, you can use any fertilizer that you have faith in. They are not accustomed to much here and they will adapt well for you.

I recommend plucking any blooms that your plant may have at the time of transplant. A happy plant is trying to procreate. It has no idea that you are about to change its entire environment. Instead of directing nourishment to save its fruit, it will be able to work on its root development. Let it produce new blooms whenever it is ready and settled in your garden.

I put thick newspaper sections around the plant and even a couple feet out from the row. (I plant double rows). I cover this with lots of pine needles. You can use a 6" thick layer of grass clippings. Now, your weeds will not grow up around your plants this season. The water will ooze through your mulch and will not compact the roots' growing area that you just dug out and loosened up. Now, your dirt diseases (which need moisture to thrive) should stay in the dirt and since the pine needles/mulch dry out daily on the top, many dirt diseases are quarantined to the ground and will not be up facing your precious foliage.

I run a soaker hose on the ground along all the plants. It lets me water every couple days for 10 minutes with that same oozing so that the roots get a deep watering. Late in the season, I may water every day. Again, only the ground stays wet. This will also help with rings and splits on your fruit.....maintaining constant watering patterns.....you can not control drought and heavy rainfall, but you can maintain constant damp conditions. Maintaining wetness will also help your calcium intake that shows up as a deficiency by blossom end rot.

I use tomato cages around each plant. This will give their limbs (arms) a rest and their stem (backbone) will grow straight. You will get a stronger stem that will support more and larger fruit. The plant will only grow what its backbone can support. I have a lot of customers who stake with various stakes...fence posts and clothes line.... It works for them, especially if you are planting a lot of tomato plants. Look..... the lushest happiest plants I have seen are in tomato cages. Cages give them support on the branches too. Also, the cages support the stem all the way up, not in just a spot or two. Also, the cage keeps the stem strong as it is supporting it 360 degrees. I have seen thicker/stronger stems on caged tomato plants....because if you think about it...the stem is not splinted, it is supported....would you rather have splints on your back or would you rather wear a back brace? ...sorry, I get carried away in comparison! I tell people to invest in a few tomato cages; Stake the others. You can add a few each year if you just don't want to go crazy this year. You can always use them later for trees, cucumbers, roses. You want to splurge on these and get the strongest ones you can find. The absolute strongest cages are made of concrete wire. You used to be able to find abandoned remnants on lots of new home construction. It takes bolt cutters to cut the stuff, but it is a strong cage forever! ....this is the absolute bargain route if you can locate some!

Now, I go through for the next few weeks and pluck off suckers.....the new plant that grows out from the stem at a 45 degree angle. I pluck them until they are about 2 feet tall. If you don't know what a sucker is, just ask. Doing this for at least a couple weeks will give your tomato plant undivided nutrients. Suckering will also keep your stem straight. Whenever a sucker comes in, you then have two plants competing for the nutrients and the best position for sunlight. This results in a curve in the spine (stem).

If you decide to pluck suckers, you can take a little extra effort to create a later crop of plants. It works best to allow these suckers to grow about 4" long. You can put them in a milk jug full of water (the jug opening is just the right size). Within 7-10 days, they will sprout new water roots all along the immersed stem. Slightly under a tree...in a little shaded spot is a great place to park the jug until you see roots appearing....after that full sun and heat, can't kill them. Next, you can pot them up (same depth or deeper than they sat in the water). Keep watered well as they graduate to solid foods, a.k.a. dirt!!! Within another 10 or so days, you can be introducing them to your others in the garden.

After the plants have had a few weeks to adjust to their new environment, many gardeners remove all the branches and leaves off the lower portion of the plant if they begin to hang down on the ground. This may mean you have 10" of naked stem at the base. Any portion of the foliage coming in contact with the ground can be a source for disease. This can just be an added precaution in addition to mulching to keep the foliage dry and soil free.

The way I mulch and such is a lot of work in the beginning, but hey, the weather is nice. Later when it is hot and all is lazy, all you will do is turn on the soaker hose before work for 10 minutes preferably in the morning and pick fruit...forget weeding!!! Remember..... no one was around to see your toils (or help) in the Spring.....so just pick tomatoes, lay back and show off!!!

#### My 2010 garden of containers – cheating when it was raining every day:

I couldn't get any plants in my garden, for all the rain. Any time I thought about it, I pulled out another container, and planted another. Miracle Grow Potting Mix with Moisture Control is wonderful. Generally, they say, you need a container at least the size of a 5 gallon bucket. I cheated...I used cheap 3 gallon containers. Whenever I put them in the garden, I cut out a portion of the bottom to let the roots out, if they made it that far. These containers can be re-used by just inserting cardboard in the bottom each season....again, the roots will make their way out, if need be. Bleaching the containers between seasons is highly recommended. New potting soil (non-tomato-tainted) is also important....the flowers get the old stuff.

Placing the containers into my garden rows, yielded a quick, mature looking garden. They still took the cages over the 3 gallon containers easily. I sunk the containers at least 6-10" into the soil, for cooling and evaporative measures. I really like the early start this gave me (in a too-wet climate). The only downfall was that the containers dried quicker than my normal ground garden would have. Irrigation hose fixed this problem. Mulch was absolutely necessary to make it through a day! I think in the future, I will continue to use the soaker hoses (easier to install) and bury my entire container. They are only 12" x 12", and I am a good digger!

We know that rotating our garden areas/crops is a good idea for good housekeeping. Space doesn't always permit. This container method, gave our soil a bit of a break this season.

My 2011 finding:

I planted my garden late last year. At some point, I had 30% of my plants that were not producing. After laying awake contemplating (as women have been known to do) and much internet reading, I had a new theory that bumblebees would be my new best friends. My understanding was that they are better pollinators than our honey bees. I went to (flower) nurseries (maybe I just needed an excuse to shop) and bought all the ones buzzing with bumblebees. These were the purples, reds...the brightest, most dominant colors in the place. I also understand that the bumblebees like drifts of flowers (groups or rows) rather than sporadic plantings....I started beds on my corners which will probably grow over time.

My poor tomato production was due to the high Summer temps. Tomato plant pollen is much less viable above 90 degrees. An unpollinated blossom will drop with no fruit. More reading gave me another dose of the "birds and the bees". Tomato blossoms are "perfect" and self fertile. Although the pollen was not as "viable" in the heat, my (newly attracted) bumblebees would amp up the pollination and subsequent fruit through their buzzing. Then.....I found information online where people were using cheap battery operated tooth brushes, or spin brushes (approximately \$4 these days) to "buzz" the blossoms. I felt like a weirdo out there.....but it really, really worked!!!! I buzzed them every third day for two weeks. My original plan was to get them in the coolest part of the day, but I don't think they were really that picky. I just placed the spin brush on the back of the blossoms. A few blossoms would drop along the way, but those were non-pollinated ones that were already spent. Healthy blossoms would amazingly blur in movement, but would not damage. Soon my tomato plants, that had no fruit, were loaded up. Above all.....I knew that each new baby tomato was MY tomato.....I did that!!!!!!!!!!!! You gotta' try it!!!!

I planted my first tomato garden on my own because I thought it would make me a better person! Gardening people are just good people! Why do you plant tomatoes?

Happy Gardening!  
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TomatoGirl

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