

PROLONGING YOUR TOMATO GROWING SEASON

Red, yellow, green, orange, brown, purple, and even white, the quintessential tasty treats of summer will soon stop producing. Cooler weather and shorter days signal the end of our tomato growing season and your plants will begin to decline. Tomato lovers will soon be forced to consider perfectly shaped, blemish free, tasteless and characterless supermarket tomatoes.

But wait! Here are a few ways to extend your home grown tomato season by a few weeks or more.

Bring plants inside: If you planted your tomatoes in pots, of course, bring them inside when cooler weather is predicted. Or, try digging out a plant or two, potting them up and sharing a sunny window (or if you are hard core, a grow light) in your cozy home. Some varieties will continue to produce for a time despite the shorter days.

Harvest early: Tomatoes are very sensitive to frost. When frost is predicted and you have no way to protect your plants, you may want to harvest all fruit that are in the mature green stage of ripening. Fruit harvested at this stage will still ripen, although not with the same flavor as fruit harvested with some color. Place fruit in a single layer in a warm, dark location with some air movement. Tomatoes and other fruit do not need light to ripen. Store the fruit where the temperature does not go below 55 degrees. Lower temperatures will cause poor flavor in the fruit. Or, as an alternative, dig up your tomato plants, remove as much dirt as possible from the roots and hang the plants upside down in a garage or shed. Pick the fruit as it ripens.

Irrigate before a frost: A moist soil can hold four times more heat than a dry soil. It will also conduct heat to the soil surface faster than a dry soil, aiding in frost prevention. Studies have shown that air temperature above a wet soil was 5 degrees higher than that above a dry soil and the difference was maintained until 6 a.m. the next morning. Thus, plants should be well watered the evening before a frost.

Cover your plants: Covering your plants can give them frost protection. The covers can be placed right over the plants, or can be supported on stakes. However, laying the covers right over the plants will cause frost damage where the cover touches the plants. Any material can be used to cover your plants however woven fabrics are better insulators than plastics or paper. The best time to apply a cover is in the late afternoon after the wind has died down. Remove covers the next morning before the sun begins to shine on the covers.

Another covering method is to build a vertical cloche (a transparent covering for outdoor plants) using stakes or wire fencing around an individual tomato plant. Wrap plastic or sheeting around the support, leaving the top open during warmer days but tie the top closed when it is cold.

Choose varieties bred for cooler weather: Next year remember to plant a few varieties that are recommended for cooler areas and can produce well into the fall months. Red October can be harvested in October and has a shelf life of 3-4 weeks after harvest. Champion and Siberian are both varieties that produce well into the frost season. An online search will help you identify other varieties from colder climates like Russia.

For more information on how to extend your tomato production, call or stop by one of the Master Gardener help desks. 5009 Fairgrounds Road, Mariposa, 966-7078. Tuesdays 9:00-12:00 or Thursdays 2:00-5:00. Or, 6430 Greely Hill Road (behind the Village Realty), Greeley Hill, 878-3209, Saturdays 1:00-3:00.

Mariposa Master Gardeners are pleased to be participating with The Mariposa Agri-Nature trail in presenting a special event this fall; Weekend in the Country – A Tomato Fest. Follow our tomato growing tips in upcoming columns and grow your own great tomatoes.