

STARTING TOMATOES FROM SEED

By: Helen Willoughby-Peck

If you have been perusing the seed catalogs or have visited a nursery or big box store recently in anticipation of starting vegetable seeds, you may think that starting tomatoes from seed at home is an expensive proposition. It's really not. Yes, there are special trays, domes, heating mats, grow lights and so on. But, all you need is some type of clean potting mix, a clean container, your seeds, a warm sunny window and your own enthusiasm.

Tomatoes should be started indoors 6-8 weeks before the last frost. The "official" last frost date for Mariposa is May 15. If you are like me, the beautiful spring weather makes it difficult to wait until the middle of May to get your vegetable garden going. At 2,000 feet, a good solution is to plan to set out a few plants around April 1 and continue weekly plantings up to mid-May. This will reduce your chances of a complete crop loss due to frost. It will also spread out your harvest period, which is often a good idea, especially if you are using determinate varieties. Remember to add about five days to these dates for each 1,000 feet increase in the elevation of your garden.

Start with a clean, water proof container. A good choice is to recycle your plastic salad mix containers. Some people even use Styrofoam eggs cartons. It is important to make sure that you sterilize any containers that you have planted in before to avoid exposing your seedlings to viruses or other plant diseases. Dip them into, or spray them with a solution of 9 parts water and 1 part bleach. Rinse your container thoroughly and allow to dry. Add clean, moistened planting medium. Purchased seed starting or planting mixes are good choices. Or, peat pellets (a compressed peat tablet which grows to about 1.5 inches when moistened) are a good choice because the plant roots don't get disturbed when you transplant them to larger containers because you plant the pellet along with the plant.

In the planting medium make shallow furrows with a pencil or chopstick about 1/4 inch deep. Sow seeds by dropping them along the bottom of the furrows 1/2 inch apart. Gently pinch together soil to cover each furrow. Or, if using peat pellets, drop one seed each into each water swollen pellet. Water gently and label each variety. Cover the container with the plastic lid from your salad mix or lightly with plastic wrap and place the container in a warm place, 75-80° F. Seedlings should emerge after about 7 days. As soon as seeds begin germinating and stems start to show above the soil, it's critical to provide a strong light source for at least 6-8 hours per day. A very sunny window or, if that is not available, florescent bulbs are a good alternative.

If you have planted your seeds too closely you can thin your plants after about 15 days by simply cutting off the weakest seedlings. Do not pull them out as you will disturb the other seedlings during this critical time. After about 30 days the first set of "true" tomato leaves begin to appear above the first set of baby (cotyledon) leaves. This is when you should transplant them into a larger container.

Recycled nursery pots at least 3-4 inches in diameter (cleaned with the bleach/water solution mentioned above), new plastic or wax coated beverage cups (with a hole punched in the bottom) are good, inexpensive choices. Fill each container with clean moistened planting mix and make a hole to receive the seedling. If you are using peat pellets, transplanting is as simple as burying the peat holding the seedling into the container with potting mix. If you started your seeds in planting mix, scoop the seedling out keeping as much of the root ball intact, as possible. A spoon or fork is a great tool for this. Insert each seedling into the hole to the base of its cotyledon leaves. The seedlings will grow additional roots along their buried stems thereby contributing to sturdy and vigorous plants. Gently water the seedlings so they settle into the planting mix. Keep them warm at about 65-70 degrees and moist until you are ready to prepare them for planting into the garden.

For more information on starting tomatoes from seed or for other home garden questions, call, or drop by the Master Gardener helpdesk on Tuesdays 9:00-12:00 or Thursdays 2:00-5:00, 5009 Fairgrounds Road, (209) 966-7078.

In our next column we will discuss when and how to prepare your seedlings for planting outside, choosing an appropriate site and soil preparation.

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.