

## **HOW TO TRANSPLANT YOUR TOMATOES SUCCESSFULLY**

**By: Helen Willoughby-Peck**

**It looks like spring has sprung and you are itching to plant your newly started or purchased baby tomatoes. Whoa! Wait just a bit. While the calendar may say it's spring, and the weather may be glorious, Mariposa's last average frost date is May 15th. Last year we had a hard frost even later than that. Tomatoes are very sensitive to cold and, unless you plan to protect them with row covers, plastic jugs or some other type of cover when a frost is predicted, you may well lose them.**

**If you started your tomatoes from seed (or you are unsure if your nursery did it for you) you will need to harden them off before you plant them in the ground. Hardening off refers to a process whereby you introduce your new plants to the outside elements gradually, acclimating plants to the harsh reality of outdoor conditions after they have been kept all snugly in a green house or indoors since germinating. Taking the time to do this will minimize plant stress and reduce or eliminate seedling loss.**

**Harden them off about two weeks before you want to plant your tomatoes into your garden. Put your potted tomato plants outside in a sheltered area for an increased amount of time every day, gradually increasing the amount of sun and breeze exposure. Start by putting your tomatoes out in morning sun and moving them, over time, to include more intense afternoon sun, finally leaving them out overnight in a sheltered area.**

**Once you have hardened off your tomatoes, it's time to plant them into their permanent location. Tomatoes require lots of sun and loose, rich, well-drained soil. Any reduction in sun exposure may reduce your yield or prohibit the formation of any tomatoes. If you have had tomato plants with disease symptoms in previous years, it is important to plant your new tomato plants in soil that has not grown tomatoes or their relatives, such as peppers or eggplants, for three or more years.**

**Spread and mix organic matter such as compost and a high-phosphorus fertilizer over the area. Do not use a fertilizer high in nitrogen as it will produce excessive leaf growth when you want to focus on a high yield of tomatoes. Gently remove your tomato plant from its container. Make a hole deep enough to bury the stem as far as the bottom leaves or, if the stem is spindly, remove all leaves except the top cluster. Dig a small trench and lay the tomato stem horizontally into the trench leaving the top clusters of leaves above ground. Tomatoes have a somewhat unique ability to grow roots along their stem system. This offers the advantage of allowing more of the plant's root system to be in the upper layer of soil, which warms up first in the spring, usually contains the richest nutrients and, depending on your watering habits, more access to water during the hottest part of the summer season. Place plants about 2 feet apart in 3 to 5 foot rows. Press the soil firmly around the plant and water thoroughly to remove any air pockets. Cloudy days are best for transplanting, as seedlings are less likely to dry out or suffer from sharp temperature changes. Be sure to stake or trellis your tomatoes as they will grow large and heavy with fruit as the months pass.**

**It's not too late to plant your seeds directly into the ground outdoors. Although planting directly into the garden after frost threat will delay your summer harvest. To do so, plant more seeds than necessary in order to make up for any losses from insects, such as cutworms. Plant seeds in rows and have each row 3 to 5 feet apart. Push them into the soil 1 inch deep. Firm the soil lightly, and cover with a thin mulch of organic material, such as compost, to hold soil moisture. Water well and keep moist during the germination period. When the plants are about 3 inches high, thin each row to 2 feet apart. Be sure to stake or trellis your tomatoes as they will grow large and heavy with fruit as the months pass.**

**For more information on transplanting tomatoes into the garden or other home garden questions drop by, the Master Gardener helpdesk on Tuesday, 9:00 – 12:00 or Thursdays 2:00 to 5:00 at 5009 Fairgrounds Road or call 966-7078. For North County gardening support call 878-3209.**

***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.***