

Coastal Tomato Success

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There is nothing that compares to a home grown, vine ripe tomato. Tomatoes are about the most celebrated backyard fruit and with a few pointers, producing a bumper crop along the Central Coast is actually possible. In this short piece, I hope to offer a few of my best secrets.

Monterey County is big in size and diverse in climate. Because hot climates found in South County are easier to grow in than coastal climates, I will focus on growing near the coast. Your choice of variety is one of the most important things to take into consideration. Proven coastal varieties include: Boxcar Willie, Black Prince, Caspian Pink, Glacier, Japanese Black Trifele, Manitoba, Siberian, San Francisco Fog and Siletz.

Be sure to check whether the variety you have chosen is “determinant” or “indeterminate.” Determinant type tomatoes tend to set and ripen their fruit all at one time, making a large quantity available when you’re ready to make sauce. Indeterminate types tend to bear all season.

When planting, choose the sunniest place in your yard and always remember to plant after any risk of frost danger. Some folks consider black plastic or pvc pipe with plastic sheeting over plants to develop more warmth for the plant to succeed. Be sure to rotate the location you are planting tomatoes. After a couple of years in the same place, soil born pests and diseases will decrease vigor in your plants. When you plant your seedlings, bury them deep in the ground all the way up to the first set of leaves.

One of the keys to high yield and great fruit is the soil. If you are planting into a container, use a high grade potting soil from a local nursery. Cheap potting soil found at the grocery store is often not fully composted and may contain soil born diseases. I always recommend a good organic fertilizer like the Dr. Earth label, as well. If you have not started using Mycorrhizae yet, you should start. It is an organic amendment that works extremely well to double or triple the effective root mass of tomatoes.

Once your tomatoes are in the ground, be sure not to over water them. Further, pay attention to weather. Cool and foggy days will require more frequent water than the balmy ones. I also encourage folks to pinch back the leaves on the bottom one foot of the plant once the plant reaches three feet tall. Those bottom leaves are susceptible to soil borne pathogens that often splash up. I find that compost tea helps to treat any leaf spot or fungus that develops.

As your plant begins to thrive, you will want to remove any suckers that develop in the crotches of branches. They won’t bear fruit and will take energy away from the rest of the

plant. Be sure not to prune the rest of the plant. It's only the suckers you don't want. Sun helps to ripen fruit and keep fungus under control, so remove leaves as needed. Just remember that it's the leaves that are photosynthesizing and creating the sugars that give flavor to your tomatoes.

One of the greatest challenges gardeners face is lack of fruit set due to blossom drop. The most common cause of tomato blossom drop is temperature. Tomatoes grow best with a daytime temperature range between 65 F and 85 F and nighttime temperatures above 50 F. While tomato plants can tolerate more extreme temperatures for short periods, several days or nights with temps outside the ideal range will cause the plant to abort fruit set and focus on survival.

I always tell my clients in cooler climates not rush to get their tomatoes planted in the spring. I advise waiting until nighttime temperatures are reliably above 50 F. The truth is that there is no advantage to planting tomatoes too early. If you are worried about a good size crop, simply choose those coastal / early maturing tomato varieties.

There are a few other tips I can offer to ensure a good crop of tomatoes. You have to remember that tomatoes need help to pollinate. It often helps to attract bees to your tomatoes with nectar rich flowers like Mexican Sage, Lavender or even Rosemary. I also recommend that folks not over fertilize. This especially applies to chemical fertilizers. Too much nitrogen encourages the plant to grow more foliage, not more fruit.

Growing your own tomatoes is both healthy and delicious. With the right varieties and advice, a good fruit set is easier than you would think. Even if you decide to start small with a half wine barrel or pot, stroll into your favorite local nursery for heirloom varieties and professional advice.