

# How I Grow Tomatoes in Tucson

## By Gary Vender, Master Gardener

Last year, as my winter garden of greens and root vegetables became exhausted, I prepared the increasingly vacant soil area with lots of homemade compost – occasionally turning the soil and always keeping it hydrated to maintain the soil’s microbial activity. Initially, I planted 30 tomato plants (nine varieties) on February 25<sup>th</sup> and added 10 more starts (three new varieties) over the next four weeks. Worm castings were added to each hole and the planting was done the day after a decent rain, so the soil was moist but not soggy. In between each start, I planted marigolds and garlic to ward off undesirable insects.



My primary focus for this garden was tomato varieties not found in the local grocery stores with a secondary focus on sauce tomatoes. I planted three of my favorites, Celebrity, San Marzano, and Italian Roma, plus some new varieties like Bloody Butcher, Punta Banda, and Arkansas Travelers.

The Master Gardener course taught me the importance of record keeping. For the first time with this garden, I made and maintained a “Tomato Harvest Record Sheet.” Each line had the harvest date, Type of Tomato, Number of Units, Total Weight, and Average Weight. I also subtotaled the number of tomatoes for that date and the total weight. At last count, July 10, 2016, I had harvested over 2,500 tomatoes (200 pounds) and the plants still have many more on the vine.

Caging or staking of your plants is a personal preference. I experimented with my determinate (bush) and indeterminate (vining) varieties to see what works best in the size and spacing of my garden. For example, I caged some Celebrity (semi-determinate), staked others, and left several unencumbered. Because Celebrity is the largest/heaviest tomato I grow, I keep some plastic bags in the mailbox next to the garden so I can slide them under fruit that sits on the ground. This helps prevent water and/or bug damage.

My harvesting technique is not considered traditional, but it worked very well for me. The conventional wisdom is to let the fruit ripen on the vine. I have certainly tried this approach, and lost many big juicy tomatoes to birds and insects in the process. So I now pick them when they turn orange to orange-

ish red on their blossom end. Harvesting is done early (5-ish) every morning. I carry a pail and pruning shears so as I harvest I also prune dead or dying plant material. I then place them in a tray with an LED full-spectrum grow light over it because of its low voltage consumption, and I leave it on all day.

The bounty is then separated into variety type, counted, weighed, and documented. The fruit is then placed in plastic trays under the grow light, and as they ripen are moved to other locations on sunny window ledges. When large batches become ripe they are made into sauce while others are dehydrated in a solar oven. Tomato sauce is frozen and the dried ones are vacuum sealed and stored. No pesticides or chemicals were necessary. With the use of garlic, marigolds, onions, and the natural predators (cats, lizards and birds), I lost zero crops to insects and only 12 to birds.



I highly recommend keeping a copy of the Pima County Cooperative Extension publication ["Growing Tomatoes"](#) handy. It's an excellent two-page synopsis. Watch the weather reports, be present in your garden every day, and be proactive on what your garden needs.

Photos by Gary Vender