

Fall Tomatoes Are the Best

There is no debate . . . we all (well, most of us) love our tomatoes. It is so much fun and rewarding to grow them from seedlings into fruit-bearing machines. A great way to get the kids involved in nature. Home-grown tomatoes are less expensive and just taste better than store bought. But growing tomatoes in our climate can be a challenge. Why is that?

Tomatoes were first found in the South American Andes mountains around 700 A.D. by the Aztecs, then brought to North America by Europeans many centuries later. This mountain environment provided cool nights and warm (not hot) days with plenty of moisture. Here at home, we strive to get them planted in early spring after the last frost to have delicious fruit before it gets too hot.

Because tomatoes are warm-weather plants, tomatoes will not grow below 50° F and will not set fruit until the nighttime air temperature reaches 55°F. So, planting tomato plants when nighttime air temperatures first consistently reach 50°F will give the vines enough time to mature before fruiting. Further, the ideal soil temperature for planting tomatoes is 60°F. On the warm side, once our nighttime temperatures reach the upper 70s and daytime temperatures reach 92°F consistently, our tomato fruit production drops off dramatically, commonly known as “blossom drop”. This is where tomato blossoms will simply not stay connected to the vine long enough to produce fruit. While horticulturalists have developed cultivars that are pest and disease resistant, not much can be done about the Oklahoma heat.

But there's hope. What if the fruit could ripen and be picked in environmental conditions similar to the South America mountains? They can and it is called fall tomatoes. The trick is to either get new tomato plants going during hot summer days or “baby” the spring vines through the torturous heat. Larger tomato varieties (16 oz Beefsteak) can take as much as 100 days to produce and ripen. So, given our average first fall frost is late October, this means the plants must be started by late July to have a chance to ripen before the first killing frost occurs. Other varieties (8 oz Better Boy) only take 75 days to mature, yet others (4 oz Early Girl) can take as little as 50-60 days to ripen. So, if you get a late start, consider these.

Instead of spring-planted tomatoes trying to ripen when it is getting hot, fall tomatoes are ripening when the air temperature is cool, yet the soil temperature is still warm enough for roots to prosper. If you encounter an early frost, simply drape some form of shade cloth over the plants to get through the night. Remember to remove it the next morning. If you plant late or get hit with an early hard freeze, go ahead and pick the tomatoes (even the green ones) and bring them inside. They will continue to ripen indoors off the vine.

So, impress your friends with home-grown tomatoes around Halloween or even Thanksgiving. And you will be impressed with the delicious flavor that they deliver during that time of year.

