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I wanted to thank my good friend Doug Chapman, Regional Extension Agent, for sharing with me some of the technical content of this article. It could not have come at a better time, as just this weekend I was eyeing the small green tomatoes on my own vines and wishing they would hurry up and get ripe.

The tomato is the King of the vegetable garden. Most folks who only have room for a small garden will at least plant a few tomato plants. Tomatoes have been planted in good soil, poor soil, on mountains, in valleys, in containers and hay bales, in greenhouses and even upside down in plastic buckets. There just doesn't seem to be any place that people won't try to grow them. This brings up several questions, chief of which is what is the best way to grow them? That depends on who is doing the growing but one thing that is common to every situation is sunlight. Tomatoes absolutely must have full sun to grow their best. The more sunlight, the more carbohydrates and other good things the plants are able to make and the better quality the fruit will be. Botanically, a tomato is classified as a berry, but who's counting they are great no matter how they are classified. Give me a few tomatoes, a loaf of bread, and some salt and mayonnaise during the summer time and they could call them palm trees for all I care.

In the South, the hot days and warm nights take a toll on the tomato plant. Tomatoes don't set fruit very well when the nighttime temperatures are above 70 degrees. There are a few varieties such as 'Solar Set', 'Hawaiian' and 'Heatwave' that have the ability to set fruit during the summer. The heat and humidity in Dixie also make diseases and insects worse. Two of the most common tomato diseases are early blight and bacterial spot. Early blight is caused by a fungus that over-winters on crop debris left in the garden from the previous year. When tomatoes are planted in the same place the following year, the fungus infects the new plants. It usually starts at the base of the plant and ascends the plant during the year. I hear a lot of "experienced gardeners" refer to the disease progression as "firing up". Fungicides containing chlorothalonil, maneb or mancozeb are effective at controlling this disease but must be applied throughout the growing season. This means beginning your spray program BEFORE the disease starts. I begin spraying my tomatoes as soon as I plant them. Bacterial spot over-winters in the same way, but is caused by a bacteria. This disease can be controlled with copper sulfate or copper hydroxide.

Tomato spotted wilt virus (TSWV) has become so serious in South Alabama that commercial growers are planting varieties with resistance to this disease. Several new varieties are available to the home gardener such

as 'Amelia', 'BHN 640' and 'BHN 444'. I have already had several cases of tomato spotted wilt virus infected tomatoes brought into the office. Commercial growers have a couple of new varieties 'Crista' and 'Quincy' which have TSWV resistance, You will be seeing more of these in the future.

Last year was the worst I have ever seen for stink bugs on tomato. The damage usually shows up as small white spots just under the skin of the tomato fruit. Aphids and whiteflies were also problems for some gardeners. Tomato fruitworm and tobacco hornworm are also common pests. Several insecticides are effective on these insects. Give us a call at 205-221-3392 for the most current recommendation.

The old standby varieties are still popular and a lot of people wouldn't plant anything but 'Better Boy', 'Parks Whopper' and 'Homestead'. With the increasing disease pressure, it's going to be more important to rotate your tomatoes to a new location at least every two years. Soil test and make sure your new garden spot has the needed nutrients and lime and fertilize according to the soil test recommendation.

Get your plants started early and replace any that die or become diseased. Try something new this year and plant a small fruited or Roma tomato variety. The variety Roma has a great deep red color and thick pulp which makes it a great choice for canning or juicing; however, it can be very susceptible to fungal diseases such as early blight.

For home gardeners who plant only small numbers of tomato plants, the use of pine straw mulch around your tomatoes will help to hold valuable soil moisture in the ground and will help protect your tomatoes' roots from the scorching summer sun. I also lay soaker hose underneath the pine straw to make summer watering much easier. (I tend to be a little bit of a lazy gardener myself). Simply lay your soaker hose on the ground next to your tomatoes, stake it down in place, and mulch right over the top of it. What could be easier?

A good liming program and the use of mulch and soaker hose will also help cut down on the occurrence of a very common tomato "disease" called blossom end rot which isn't actually a disease at all but rather a lack of the nutrient calcium.

Commercial tomato growers plant determinant (or bush) tomato varieties which have a more compact growth habit and set fruit over a shorter period of time than the indeterminate varieties grown in most gardens. Commercial growers plant determinant plants at several different times during the season. As one setting is picked, the next one is beginning to ripen. If you want to try this "staggered" planting method in your garden plan ahead and save space for the tomatoes you want to plant later.