



ALABAMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM/ LIMESTONE COUNTY OFFICE

The Garden Spot
For week of April 6, 2009

Grow Good Tomatoes in 2009

Last week, the Limestone County office of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System presented three classes on raising and preserving home-grown tomatoes. Over eighty people attended these classes to learn not only how to grow better tomatoes, but how to preserve them. Gardeners are now preparing to set out their tomato plants (if they've not already done so). There are several things that home growers can do to have high-quality tomatoes. This week's article will recap some of the information that was shared during the tomato classes:

Choose a good variety. While you can choose from hundreds of varieties of tomatoes, select those which have been tested under local conditions or have performed well in our area. Ask your neighbors or an experienced dealer what varieties are good. Also, buy the *type* of tomato you want. For example: different varieties are better for slicing rather than canning.

Disease control in the home garden begins by planting disease-resistant tomato varieties. Look for the "VFN" designation on tomato plants you are purchasing. This means that they are bred to be resistant to certain diseases.

Site selection. Select a spot where the plants will be in full sunlight most of the day. It is convenient to locate plants near the house and close to a water supply. Change your planting site from year to year. There are diseases and fungi which are common in tomatoes that remain in the soil or in the debris left from the past-year's

crop. Move your tomato location every couple of years. This is also a good strategy to do for most of your garden crops.

Don't get in a hurry! While the warmer days, flowering trees, and lush lawns are indicating spring is at hand, don't get in too big of a hurry to set out those tomato plants. As we've seen this week, frosts are damaging to tomato plants, and it's not uncommon to have frost up until mid-April.

Preparing the Soil. Give your tomatoes a good start. For individual plants, dig a hole 2 feet wide and 12 inches deep. If possible, save the topsoil that was removed from the hole and mix two to three parts of the topsoil and one part of well- decomposed manure or compost; add $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of a complete fertilizer (8-8-8, 4-12-12, etc.) and $\frac{2}{3}$ cup of ground dolimitic limestone if the soil has not been limed in the past 3 years. Thoroughly mix these ingredients to make a nice growing medium that will give a nice start for your tomatoes.

Controlling Insects and Diseases. Insects and diseases are probably the biggest challenge for the home tomato gardener. Disease development is favored by wet, humid conditions, so keep foliage dry by watering in the morning and use trickle irrigation whenever possible. Watering deeply once or twice a week is better than shallow-frequent watering.

Alabama weather is attractive to many insects, including fruitworms, hornworms, aphids, and stinkbugs. These same hot, humid conditions make control of diseases a challenge. Be prepared to use an effective spray program, starting 7-10 days after you set out your tomatoes and continuing through harvest.

There are many things you can do to have a successful home tomato crop. For more information, either stop by the Extension Office and request publication # ANR-302 or go online to the Alabama Cooperative Extension website (www.ACES.edu) and obtain this and other publications directly from the internet.

If you have questions on home gardening or related topics, remember that the Limestone County Master Gardeners have a 'HelpLine' on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. They are highly trained and willing to help with your home gardening and home grounds questions. Their phone number is 232-5510 and

they are located in an office at the Limestone County Extension Office at 1109 W. Market Street in Athens.

###