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News Release

## Home Grown Tomatoes

**Question:** I love home grown tomatoes but I have a hard time growing them in my garden. Can you give me some tips on how to be more successful?

**Answer:** The tomato is the King of the vegetable garden. Most people who only have room for one or two items will grow their own tomatoes. However, it is one of the most challenging crops to grow because of the number of pest that wreak havoc on this beloved fruit. 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? I don't pretend to know the best way but I do know that ample sunlight is critical. Tomatoes have to have near 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. Disease problems will be lessened in full sun because the plants will dry quickly each morning and after a rain.

Also, a well drained soil is critical to success because of a number of root disease problems that are worsened under wet conditions. There is a lot of interest in heirloom varieties but be forewarned that they typically have greater disease problems. One simple technique to reduce the disease pressure is to prune tomato plants to a single stem by removing the side shoots (suckers) they produce in abundance. This will improve the air movement and allow for better drying of the foliage. Foliage that dries quickly will have less foliar disease. Last year we hardly saw any foliar diseases on tomatoes because of the drought unless people watered the foliage while watering the plant. When watering you should direct the water at the base of the plant and avoid getting the foliage wet.

The most common tomato disease is early blight. Early blight is caused by a fungus that over-winters on crop debris left in the garden from the previous year but it also comes from many weeds. Old-timers refer to the disease progression as "firing up" because it progresses so quickly from bottom to top. Fungicides containing chlorothalonil, or mancozeb are effective at controlling this disease but must be applied throughout the growing season.

Insects are also a constant problem on tomatoes. Stink bug damage usually shows up as small white spots just under the skin of the tomato fruit. Aphids and whiteflies can also be a problem but the biggest concern is the tomato fruitworm and hornworm. Aphids and whiteflies can often be controlled with a strong stream of water but if that doesn't work use an insecticidal soap. The worms can be more of a problem and require a harsher chemical for control. However, the products containing the bacteria commonly called "BT" can help and they are very safe.

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. If you want tomatoes all summer you should plant a heat tolerant variety. I usually start my own plants from seed in May so that I have plants to set out in June. These plants will bare in the heat of August when the earlier planted varieties fizzle out. Consider trying one of these varieties that have this heat tolerance such as 'Solar Set', 'Hawaiian' and 'Heatwave'.

For further information, go to the web and look at our "Backyard Tomato Growing" publication: <http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-0302/> or feel free to contact me, Tony Glover, Regional Extension Agent, at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email [gloveta@aces.edu](mailto:gloveta@aces.edu).

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