**HORTICULTURE COLUMN**

**TOMATOES**

Tomatoes are probably the most popular vegetable grown in home gardens. March planting still allows time for harvest before our summer heat and rain get the best of tomato plants.

The modern tomato originated in South America. Early explorers brought the fruit back to Europe in the early 1500's. First called tomate, or apple of Peru, the early plants were sprawly and described as ugly by the explorers. Even in those early days, selective breeding by Mexican gardeners had resulted in white, orange and yellow tomatoes in a variety of sizes and shapes.

The tomato is said to have traveled from Spain to Morocco to Italy. Italians first called the fruit pomodoro or golden apple, so we assume they favored yellow tomatoes. According to legend, a traveling Frenchman misunderstood the name for Moor’s apple, pomi dei Moro, and interpreted it as pomme d’amour or love apple.

Some attributed aphrodisiac properties to the fruit, which should have increased the popularity of tomatoes. However, in 1544, an Italian herbalist realized the tomato had many poisonous relatives including deadly nightshade. Fortunately, it was later discovered that only the leaves and stems contain poisonous natural chemicals. Grown primarily as an ornamental plant, it was nearly 300 years until the tomato recovered its culinary popularity in Europe. Tomatoes seeds were introduced in catalogs in Philadelphia in 1820.

Today, tomatoes are again popular in gardens and in kitchens. Anyone who can grow a patio plant can have fresh tomatoes at home.

Since tomatoes are not productive during cold weather and are killed by frost, it is best to plant them during late summer for a fall crop or in late winter for a spring crop. March is the latest time to plant in Central Florida.

Transplants are available now at most garden centers. Select plants with good dark green color. While small transplants are recommended for most vegetable crops, long, spindly plants still have potential since the tomato is one vegetable which can root along the stem. Place long plants in a trench or bury the plant deep in the soil so only a few leaves stick out above the ground.

Varieties for Florida gardens need to be hardy to insect, disease and nematode pests. Choose from names such as "Floradel", "Better Boy", "Celebrity", "Walter", "Floramaica", "Flora-Dade", "Bragger", "Suncoast" or "Manalucie". "Solar Set" is a new variety for Florida which continues to set fruit during our hot summers.

Tomatoes will grow best where they get at least six hours of full sun. Shade limits the growth and plants don’t produce well.

If planning to grow tomatoes in containers, choose large pots, at least 5 gallon bucket size or larger. Use sterile potting soil instead of garden soil from the ground to avoid root disease and nematode problems. Container plants should be watered so that water runs out the holes in the bottom of the pot. Water soluble fertilizers designed to mix with water are ideal for plants in pots since you can water and fertilize at the same time. Brand name isn’t important, but select one for vegetables since the ratio of nutrients tends to be better for blooming and fruiting crops.

As you grow your plants, you may encounter spots on leaves or insect pests. Bring samples to the extension office or email digital photos to epabons5@ufl.edu for diagnosis. For more information on growing tomatoes or container gardening, call the Osceola County Extension office at (321) 697-3000.
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