Growing Tomatoes in Containers

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One of the most popular vegetables to grow in the home garden is the tomato. However, you do not need a backyard or large vegetable garden to grow tomatoes. All you need is a patio or outdoor location that receives sunlight where you can set a plant container. With proper care, growing tomatoes in containers can be a successful and rewarding hobby.

The tomato, which originated in South America, was first brought back to Europe by explorers in the early 1500's. First called tomate, or apple of Peru, the early plants were sprawly and described as ugly by the explorers. The tomato is said to have traveled from Spain to Morocco to Italy. Italians first called the fruit pomo doro 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.

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.

Tomatoes are popular in gardens and in kitchens. Anyone who has a patio that receives 5-6 hours of sunlight per day can grow fresh tomatoes at home. In central Florida, tomatoes grow best during the early spring and fall. Tomatoes are not productive during cold weather and are killed by frost. They are also not productive during the heat of the summer. September and February are the best months to plant tomatoes in Central Florida, whether it is in containers or in the garden.

Tomatoes can be grown in any type of container, as long as it is at least five gallons in size. Be creative with your container selection. Use bushel baskets, hampers, five-gallon buckets, barrels or other similar containers. The most important aspect of the container is that it must have drainage holes to allow for excess water to drain. If it doesn’t, punch or drill holes in the bottom of the container. Completely fill the container with a sterile potting mix found at garden centers. Use potting mix, not top soil. Top soil is not an ideal material to grow containerized tomatoes.

Tomatoes may be started in the container by planting seeds or by planting small plants that are 4-6 weeks old, called transplants. Transplants are available at most garden centers. Select plants with good dark green color, have a nice compact growth, and are insect and disease free. Varieties for Florida need to be hardy to insects and diseases. The best Florida varieties include "Floradel", "Better Boy", "Celebrity", "Walter", "Flora-Dade", "Bragger", "Suncoast" or "Manalucie". Contact us for a complete list of varieties that do best in Florida.
When planting the transplant into the container, remove the bottom two leaves at the stem. The areas where the leaves were removed are called nodes. Place the plant so these bottom-most nodes are below the soil surface. Containerized tomato plants should be watered so that water runs out the holes in the bottom of the pot. Do not allow the soil to dry out or the tomato plant to wilt. Also, do not overwater. Keep the soil at a consistent moisture level if possible.

Feed the plants by using a slow release or water soluble fertilizer. No one nutrient solution is superior, however, selecting one labeled for vegetable plants will supply the proper nutrients for the better blooming and fruiting. Make sure to follow the directions on the fertilizer label and apply at recommended rates and recommended intervals. More is not better when it comes to fertilizer.

Tomato plants are not free of insects and diseases in Florida. Keep an eye on your plant for pests. Examine the underside of the leaves and stems on a regular basis to catch invaders in a timely manner. If pests are found, only use pesticides labeled for vegetable plants on your tomatoes. Make sure to read and follow the directions for application rates and intervals.

With proper care, you can be successful growing tomatoes in central Florida. For more information on tomatoes and vegetable gardening in central Florida, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm. You may also email me at jwel2@osceola.org.