

Think spring — think tomatoes

Are you hungry for luscious ripe tomatoes?

Cold weather hurt much of Florida's winter tomatoes — which usually satisfy the appetites of Northerners and Southerners for juicy, ripe fruit — and scarcity forced prices upward.

Good advice for those yearning for vine-ripened tomatoes is to plant some of your own this gardening season.

There are many varieties from which to choose. Some are more disease-free than others, and seed catalogs indicate the number of days

weeder's guide

Earl Aronson

from planting to maturity.

There are varieties better suited to patio gardens than others. For the home gardener without special planting and lighting facilities, transplants (seedlings) generally will produce fruit faster and more easily

than starting seeds.

TOMATOES — SOME more acid than others, some tiny and suitable whole for salads, others preferable for slicing — are the most popular item in many home gardens. Some varieties will ripen all at once (determinate), while others (indeterminate), produce fruit over a longer period and are good for small families who want to enjoy tomatoes for a longer ripening period.

We get good results using 5-10-5 fertilizer. Other gardeners recommend other formulations, such as 6-

6-6. Tomatoes in the garden like some compost added to the soil — some peat moss, vermiculite and aged manure.

Try a few plants in containers with a prepared potting mix, and feed plants with a liquid or granular fertilizer after planting.

Some tomatoes do well in hot climates. Check seed catalogs, your agricultural extension service or seed store for the variety recommended for your area and soil type.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I visited Southern Florida growers who had

vast acreage and wanted to expand. This year, they suffered from the cold, and some lost nearly all their winter crops.

Seed and plant catalogs offer early, midseason, main season, big beefsteak, pasta, yellow stuffer and cherry varieties of tomatoes. Maturity times range from 52 days for Park Seed's Quick Pick and 55 days for the popular Early Girl to 72 days for Better Bush. Maturity times vary in different regions and climates.

Tom McCubbin, garden columnist for the Orlando (Fla.) Sentinel, lists these 10 favorites, with their fruit size and maturing days:

Beefmaster, over 12 ounces, 80 days; Better Boy, 12-18 ounces, 70 days; Carnival, 7-8 ounces, 72 days; Celebrity, 7-8 ounces, 70 days; Champion, 10-12 ounces, 62 days; Flora-Dade, 6-8 ounces, 77 days; Floramerica, 8-12 ounces, 75 days;

Sun Coast, 7-8 ounces, 72 days; Sweet 100, 1 inch, 65 days; and Walter, 7-8 ounces, 75 days.

IF YOU BUY SEEDLINGS ready to plant, choose squat, sturdy plants rather than lanky, spindly ones.

McCubbin advises that "the tomato is one plant that can be set deeper in the soil than it grew in the seedling container or transplant pot. Immature roots, often noticed as white bumps, form all along the stems and, when placed in contact with the soil, spread out to grow a vigorous water- and nutrient-absorbing plant."

"It's a common practice to set the first set of leaves at ground level," he said. "This also helps lanky plants stand up in the soil!"

Watch plant growth closely. Stake plants if they grow too tall. Spray if insects are present. A paper or cardboard collar will discourage cutworms.

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