

Fresh

Homegrown tomatoes rich in juicy taste

By Linda Ann Chomin
special writer

HOME GARDENS produce lush, flavorful tomatoes bursting with juice and incomparable taste.

Steve Kanitra of Redford Township and Milton Aptekar of Farmington Hills raise pesticide-free tomatoes in small spaces behind their homes. Homegrown tomatoes provide these home gardeners with unequaled fresh flavor.

Kanitra favors tomato varieties Big Boy and Beefmaster, but likes Celebrity, too. Last season, he bought up all ready-to-plant tomato seedlings at Frank's Nursery although in years past, English Gardens provided many a sturdy plant for a prolific season.

In a 25- by 15-foot garden behind his home, he lays tomato plants in shallow trenches after removing all but the top two sets of leaves around May 15.

"It adds more to the root system if you remove most of the leaves. This way, roots grow all along the stem," Kanitra said. "I add Miracle Gro when I'm planting them, but you don't want to put the fertilizer right around the roots or it'll burn it."

AT PLANTING time, Kanitra places seven-foot stakes behind the tomatoes to train the plants and hold them upright, off the ground. As they grow, he removes all but three or four main stems.

"I use electrical wire to tie them to the stakes, something real soft like an extension cord, so you can tie it loose and it won't cut into the plant as it grows," Kanitra said. "Once growing, I whack off all the leaves below the tomatoes."

Kanitra interplants marigold and



photos by GUY WARREN/staff photographer

Steve Kanitra uses pliable stereo wire to tie three or four main tomato stems on 15 plants to stakes in the back yard of his Redford Township home. Favoring Big Boy and Beefmaster tomato varieties, he uses no pesticides.

zinnia in his naturally grown garden, eliminating the need for harmful, chemical-based pesticides. He recycles grass clippings from weekly lawn mowings to mulch plants and maintain moisture in the soil.

"I let the grass dry out a couple of days. It keeps your ground moist around the tomatoes," Kanitra said.

At one time, the garden soil, a combination of clay and sand, lacked proper drainage and aeration of plant roots.

"One end was sand, the other, clay. Mixing the leaves in there really helped. In the fall, I bury all my leaves and grass in the garden," Kanitra said.

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Plant early, you pick early, notes veteran nurseryman

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Take it from an expert, David Smith of Clyde Smith & Sons Greenhouses and Garden Center. His family has grown tomatoes and farmed at their Westland homestead since 1834.

Clyde Smith's five acres of plant-producing greenhouses and 70 acres of farm-grown tomatoes yield tons of tomato seedlings, tomatoes and seed that will thrive in home gardens this growing season and next.

"A farmer has to have a feel for the weather. If he plants too early before the last heavy frost, he loses everything, all his crops," David Smith said.

Planting dates vary from year to year. Depending on the weather, farmers in this area generally plant tomatoes around May 15. Last year's growing season came early. Tomato plants could have gone into the ground the beginning of May, Smith said.

"Every year is a little different. It really depends on the weather. Sometimes you have your coldest nights during a full moon. If the full moon is on the fifth, you plant five or six days later," he said.

SMITH'S ADVICE to home gardeners is simple but valuable:

"If you plant early, you pick early. Even if it's a little cool, they have to be ready to run out and cover the plants. A newspaper works good or the hot caps

we sell here keeps plants from freezing."

Smith advises gardeners to dig about a foot deep and put a shovel full of manure in the bottom of the hole. Mix the manure in with the dirt and add two inches of dirt with no manure over it. Otherwise, the manure burns the tomato plant's root system.

"Sidedress the plants with 12-12-12 fertilizer about a foot wide from the plant, on the edge of the root system," Smith said.

As the roots grow and extend, increase the area to 18 inches, continuing to spread it in a circle on the edge of the root system.

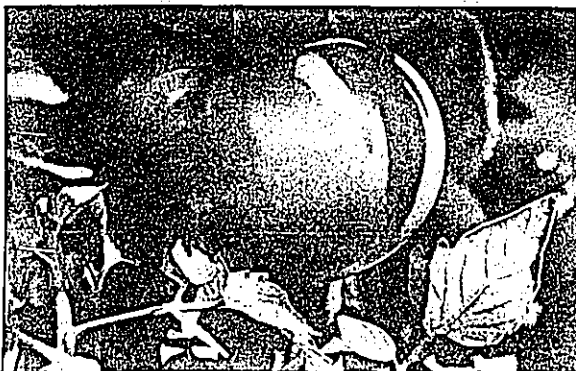
"Farmers put in three-quarters of their fertilizer before they plant and add the other 25 percent throughout the growing season," Smith said.

IN THIS area, Smith recommends growing the varieties Big Boy or Moreton Hybrid.

"We grow a lot of different varieties. It really depends on what they're after. Some tomatoes are bigger than others; some are firmer than others, some are better than others because some are for canning," Smith said.

"Moreton's Hybrid is an old variety but a good one. It's a large plant, an early variety with real good flavor."

Smith recommends that if you are not staking the tomato, to leave four feet or five square feet of space around each plant.



About 80 days after planting outdoors, the hybrid Beefmaster yields a tomato that can weigh as much as two pounds.