

The Time Is Ripe For Michigan Tomato Crop

Backyard gardeners need not fret if late spring frosts killed their tomato plants this season. There are plenty of "home-grown" tomatoes available, according to marketing officials of the Michigan Department of Agriculture.

Michigan tomato growers whose plants were killed by the frost were able to replant their fields in time for late summer harvest and the results are an outstanding crop of fresh market tomatoes.

Major production areas for tomatoes are Berrien and Van Buren counties in southwestern Michigan, and Monroe, Lenawee and Macomb counties in the southeastern part of the state.

The field-grown tomato season started in late July and will continue until freezing weather. The peak of the season is during August. Quality is excellent and prices are usually lowest during this time.

Michigan tomatoes are characterized by their superior flavor and high quality. Production is centered on well-drained sandy loamy soils and growers are using the latest techniques and cultural practices.

Tomatoes are being caged, that is, wire cages are placed around the plants while they're small to give support and eliminate soil rot and ground scars. Plants are carefully protected from insects and disease.

Proper irrigation is essential for quality, attractive fruit. Therefore, most of the commercial acreage is sprinkler irrigated to maintain an adequate level of soil moisture. During warm dry weather, from one to two inches of water is required per acre. That's about 27,150 gallons of water for a one inch depth per acre.

Fresh market tomatoes are picked by hand at the breaker, pink or ripe stages depending on market demand. At the breaker stage, they are just beginning to show color at blossom end. The pink stage is when more than 30 per cent but not more than 60 per cent of the total surface shows pink or red.

Tomatoes are firmer, may be handled with less bruising and will store longer after harvesting if picked at the breaker or pink stage. Also, they will continue to ripen off the vine.

From the fields, tomatoes go through a hydro packing line to be washed and polished, then sorted according to sizes. They are packaged, pre-cooled at temperatures between 50-55 degrees to greatly increase shelf life, and shipped to market in refrigerated trucks to insure top condition upon arrival.

Michigan growers raised 47.2 million pounds of fresh market tomatoes, valued at nearly \$7 million, on 4,100 acres of land last year. Michigan ranks seventh among



MICHIGAN FARMERS are harvesting an "excellent" crop of tomatoes this summer despite a late spring frost, according to officials of the state Department of Agriculture. August is the peak month for the tomato season, which will continue until freezing weather begins. Buy now when prices are lowest.

Several large cities are within a 300-mile radius. Localized production areas near Detroit, Grand Rapids, Flint, Lansing and Muskegon supply mainly markets in these and other nearby areas.



BACKYARD TOMATO plants can be just as good or better than those the farmers produce, as Mrs. Theres Orsucci of 15021 Nola, Livonia proves with this homegrown giant. She has several such plants, some of which stand more than eight feet tall. Mrs. Orsucci reports she grows the plants inside from seeds sent to her from her native Italy, then transplants them outdoors. She uses cow manure for fertilizer, sprays once a week and cultivates regularly. She grows many other vegetables and flowers in her impressive garden, mostly from seed "because plants are too expensive." (Observer photo by Doug Johnson)

Michigan Tomatoes Have Varied Uses

Bright, flavorful Michigan tomatoes are tops for salads, sandwiches, casseroles and main dishes. High in nutritional value, low in calories and beautifully colored, they're one of the most satisfying foods to have on hand for eating fresh, canning or cooking.

Fresh tomatoes are rich in vitamins C and A, and one medium-sized tomato ranges and that's the best time to buy, according to marketing officials of the Michigan Department of Agriculture.

Prices tend to be lower and quality is excellent. Locally, fresh tomatoes will be on the market until the first frost in autumn.

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