

Growing your best tomatoes

gardening

by Lisa Walmsley

I love this time of the year. It's not too hot yet and the garden is really starting to perform.

Wisteria, peonies, *Lily of the Valley*, roses, viburnum and all kinds of flowering trees are performing at their best - and lots more still to come.

Everyone knows homegrown produce always tastes better.

But no plant is just set and forget and a bit of knowledge and care is required to avoid problems and get the best results.

Here are a few tips:



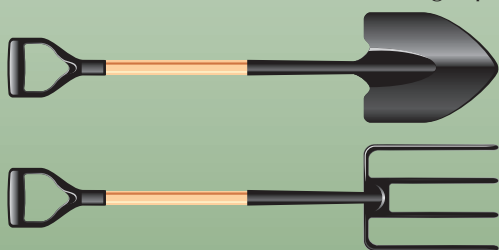
- **Full sun and heat** – tomatoes love the heat. Don't plant tomatoes too early; ideally you want the soil to warm up before planting, 15 to 18 degrees Celsius is ideal. And, don't forget, try to hold off planting until after Melbourne Cup Day to reduce the risk of a late frost. Tomatoes love sunshine, a minimum of six hours, for best results. Sunshine enables them to produce more fruit, so make sure you provide plenty of space for light to reach the whole plant. Tomatoes also need good air circulation to develop strong stems so make sure there is plenty of air flow.

- **Choose a variety that is right for you** – the classics here are *Roma* and cherry tomatoes, great for our climate with a shorter growing season but still hot and dry. Some tomatoes are more susceptible to pests and diseases - so look for varieties that have good resistance to diseases. You will probably also want varieties that provide an early harvest, heavy yields and deliciousness and hopefully all of the above.

- **Make sure you have the right growing conditions** – tomatoes like soils that are slightly acidic, somewhere between 6.2 and 6.8; you can check this with your home pH test kit. Ideally you want to add lots of compost, worked into the soil. Tomatoes, like all production plants are 'hungry' feeders so adding more compost or fertiliser during the growing season is optimal.

- **Plant at the right time** – I'm guessing many of you have had your tomatoes 'fried' by the recent frost – it's really hard to keep your tomatoes protected inside or in your glasshouse until early November (Melbourne Cup Day), but the risk of frost until this time is high and your tomatoes will not survive a frost, so try to be patient. 'Harden off' your tomatoes before putting them in the ground, by placing them in a protected spot outside before planting.

- **Plant deeply** – this takes a little getting used to, but tomatoes love been planted deep, right up to the top few leaves (if depth will allow). When planted like this, they develop roots all the way up the stem – more roots make a stronger plant.



- **Water deeply** – frequently while the fruits are developing, and when it's hot they may require more. Try to water at the base of the plant as water splashed on leaves can lead to disease problems. When the fruits start to ripen you can ease back on watering – this will coax the plant into concentrating its sugars which improves the taste of the fruit. Do not underwater to a point of wilting as this will stress the plants and could cause them to drop their blossoms and potentially their fruit.



- **Mulch** – once the soil has warmed, mulch your tomatoes. This conserves water, prevents soil-borne diseases from splashing on the plants and shades and cools the soil. Mulch can also be topped up during the season – I really like lucern hay as mulch.
- **Don't crowd your tomatoes** – allow them space to branch out. Crowded plants inhibit growth and stress the plants and can lead to disease.
- **Provide support** – some sort of 'cage' or trellis to support and keep your plants upright.
- **Remove bottom leaves** – once the plant gets to about 40cm. These are the oldest leaves and are more prone to disease and fungal problems. Make sure you disinfect your tools between plants to prevent cross contamination.
- **Remove suckers** – the growth that develops between the join of two branches. Pinch or snip off before they get too long. They do not develop fruit and take energy away from the rest of the plant.

Fingers crossed that we are now past frosts and that this year is a bumper tomato year.