Tomato is the sweet taste of summer

When people think about summer, those visions often include a trip to the local swimming pool, catching lightning bugs and putting them in a jar or planning a vacation. For others, however, slicing that first vine-ripened tomato is a sure sign summer has arrived. No matter how you pronounce it – tomato or tomahto – nothing beats that vine-ripened taste.

One of the most popular garden fruits, tomatoes are a great choice for both novice and seasoned gardeners. You don’t have to have a big, expansive space to grow them. In fact, if you happen to live in an urban area with just a small patch of lawn, or perhaps no lawn at all, tomatoes can be grown in a container.

For those who do have space available, select a site that’s in full sun, away from trees and shrubs. Because tomato plants require a lot of water, it’s a good idea to position the bed close to a water source. Something else to consider is drainage. Most garden plants need an area that drains well. If your landscape doesn’t drain well, consider putting in raised beds or mounds that are 4 inches to 6 inches high.

Although easy to grow in various types of soil, tomatoes have a penchant for well-drained soil that has been incorporated with organic matter, along with a pH level of 6.5. Fertilizing is best done based on a soil test, but in the absence of a soil test, choose a fertilizer low in nitrogen, high in phosphorus and medium to high in potassium. As you prepare the soil for planting, go ahead and work in some fertilizer. Work it into the top 6 inches of soil.

What kind of tomatoes should you grow? There are lots of varieties from which to choose. Some varieties are small and perfect for popping into your mouth for a snack. Others grow larger, making them a great choice for those who love a thick slice on a sandwich or burger.

Plants should be planted when the soil is about 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Now is a good time to go ahead and get them in the ground. That late freeze in April set the schedule back just a bit. Transplant holes should be about 4 inches deep. Be sure to plant them about 2 feet to 4 feet apart in the row. A space of about 3 feet between rows is good for staked or caged plants. You’ll need 3 feet to 5 feet between rows for non-staked plants to ensure plenty of room for you to maneuver around the garden during harvest.

We all know how hot the summer can be, so be sure to add a good layer of mulch around the plants. As I mentioned earlier, tomatoes use a lot of water, and mulch can help reduce water loss through evaporation. Mulch also helps cut down on weed infestation.
Early in the growing season, tomatoes need about an inch of water per week, but later on when the sweat factor has kicked into high gear, the plants will need at least double that. Water thoroughly once or twice a week and apply enough to penetrate the soil 12 inches to 18 inches.

If you have a local food bank, consider planting a few extra plants and donating the extra tomatoes you harvest. Another option for those extra tomatoes is to can them. You can put them up whole, sliced or pureed into paste. With just a few extra ingredients and a little more chopping, you can make and can salsa. Canning will help that fresh taste of summer last a little longer.

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