



## Summer means the taste of vine-ripened tomatoes

The smell of coconut suntan lotion, bike rides through the park or a fun family vacation can conjure up visions of summer fun for many folks. But for others, summer truly begins when experiencing the taste of the first vine-ripened tomato. No matter how you slice it, there's not much else that tastes so good.

One of the great things about growing tomatoes is that they can be grown by both seasoned and novice gardeners. Another bonus is tomatoes don't require a big, expansive garden space. In fact, if the outdoor space has room for only one pot, there's enough room to grow a tomato plant.

Gardeners may have had a tough time with their tomato plants last summer due to the excessive heat and drought. Tomatoes require a lot of water, and they dry out quickly in the heat. When selecting the spot in the landscape to plant them, choose a spot near a water spigot. These plants prefer well-drained soil, so avoid low spots where water collects. A good option for those who have less-than-ideal soil may want to consider installing raised bed. This makes it easier to incorporate organic material into the soil – and the soil will drain better. A pH level of about 6.5 is preferred. When choosing a fertilizer, choose one low in nitrogen, high in phosphorus and medium to high in potassium. Work the fertilizer into the top 6 inches of the soil.

Gardeners have a wide selection of tomato varieties. Choices may depend on what the tomatoes will be used for. Small, cherry tomatoes are great for salads, k-bobs and grilled vegetable medleys. Other varieties are great for slicing to top burgers and sandwiches. They can also be sliced for a fresh caprese salad. The options for garden-fresh tomatoes are many.

When planting tomato plants, make sure the soil is about 60 degrees. Transplant holes should be about 4 inches deep. Be sure to plant them about 2 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 to 5 feet between rows for non-staked plants to ensure plenty of room to maneuver around the garden during harvest.

For those who have experienced an Oklahoma summer, you know how hot it can get. A layer of mulch around the base of your tomato plants will not only conserve water but can help increase yield and help stop weed growth. Weeds are competing for resources, so cutting down or eliminating them is beneficial to the plants.

When it comes to watering, the plants need about an inch of water per week to begin with. That amount will need at least double that when the summer heat kicks in during July and August. Apply enough water to moisten the soil 12 to 18 inches. Gardeners will need to water more often if they planted in containers.

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 preserve them by canning. The tomatoes can be preserved whole, sliced or pureed. 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.

As a closing thought, always remember that knowledge is that you know a tomato is really a fruit; however, wisdom is knowing not to include it in a fruit salad.