



Tips for successful tomato ripening and holding

Oklahoma likely has seen the last of the triple-digit heat for 2023, but what should gardeners do about the tomatoes that are still on the vine?

As we enter the shorter and cooler days at the start of the fall season, tomatoes that survived the summer heat may begin setting fruit again. The best-case scenario is for the fruit to ripen on the vine before freezing temperatures set in, but if there's anything to be said about Oklahoma's weather, it's that it is unpredictable.

We could experience a mild fall that stretches into November and is conducive for a longer tomato harvest. Or, as we know, we could experience freezing temperatures in October. If the latter is the case, don't worry because the tomatoes can be picked before they are fully ripe and stored indoors to complete the ripening process.

Once the ripening process begins, it can't be completely stopped. Ideally, tomatoes ripen rapidly at 68°F to 77°F. Once the weather is consistently below that, it's time to bring the tomatoes indoors. They will store well at 60°F, and can be held at 55°F. At these cooler temperatures, the fruit can be held for one to two weeks.

Tomatoes ripen from the inside out. Even though they may be called vine-ripened, that means they're typically picked when the pink color first shows at the blossom end. Did you know tomatoes will turn color and ripen in light or in the dark at proper temperatures? High temperatures above 80°F prevent good color and flavor development and increase the chance of decay.

In the heat of July and August in Oklahoma, tomatoes left on the plant to fully ripen tend to turn red-orange in color. To get good red color development, the tomatoes must be picked when pink color first shows on the blossom end and placed in a cooler environment.

Bring them inside and place them on the counter. It takes only about four days at 70°F to 75°F for tomatoes to develop the full red color we associate with ripe tomatoes. This method also is the best for making sure the tomatoes have that excellent flavor we love. Picking tomatoes at this stage also reduces the chances for fruit cracking and garden losses due to birds, worms, sun scald and other causes.

For the best flavor, ripe tomatoes should not be stored in the refrigerator for any length of time. Temperatures below 55°F are damaging to the fruit.