Let's Grow Great Tomatoes

Dianne Wagner
Minnesota River Valley Master Gardener

IT'S A SUMMERTIME SPORT!

Grow tomatoes in the garden by the dozen, basket them, trellis them, stake them, grow them in pots, even grow them upside down in hanging baskets. Let’s settle one disputed question right up front: a tomato is botanically, technically, a fruit. No cousin to an apple or watermelon or anything else one knows to be a fruit, a tomato provides its own special taste sensation. Tomatoes come in just about every size and shape imaginable. Colors can vary from deep red to yellow to green and yellow striped, pink and purple in one garden. One thing is certain – there’s nothing quite like the taste sensation of a perfect tomato.

TOMATO HISTORY

Tomatoes made a long and round-about journey to land in our gardens. Historians say Spanish explorers most likely brought tomato-like seeds to Europe from Peru back in the 1500s. Some Europeans liked the way they looked but considered them poisonous; they probably just planted tomatoes to look at them. Early North American settlers brought them to this continent, Thomas Jefferson planted them at Monticello as early as 1809. By the 1830s they began really catching on in American gardens. By the Civil War, they were common just about everywhere gardeners in this country had taste buds.

HEALTHY, HAPPY PLANTS PRODUCE BETTER TASTING FRUIT

Ron Arnold, who focuses on taste at Herb and Plow Farm, an organic Community Supported Agriculture farm at Grimsley, Tennessee says, “To make tomatoes taste good like they’re supposed to, you have to have the proper building blocks,” he says. “The concept is, you feed the soil, the soil feeds the plant, and the plant feeds you.”

“Tomatoes grow best in soil with pH between 5.5 and 7.5. Have your soil tested (see Understanding Your Soil Test Report) to determine your soil’s pH and whether it should be amended. Incorporate well-rotted manure or compost, or a garden fertilizer before transplanting and sidedress after fruiting. Addition of manure or compost can add micronutrients and organic matter to soil (see Composting and Mulching).” – Cindy Tong, Extension Postharvest Horticulturist, Department of Horticultural Science, University of Minnesota Extension.

“ In the absence of a soil test, add 1 to 1-1/2 pounds of complete fertilizers such as 10-10-10 per 100 square feet or a two inch layer of well-rotted manure or compost that should be incorporated into the soil before planting.” – University of Illinois Extension Drip irrigation is the best method of irrigation to give the plant the water it needs throughout the summer. Drip irrigation keeps water off plant leaves. That reduces the possibility of disease damaging plants.

If you don’t irrigate, you get random fruit size, a big one, and then a small one. By consistently irrigating, the plants fruit better. Some folks say that sweetness is the major contributor to the liking of tomatoes. The smaller the tomato, the better the potential is to increase both acids and sugars, depending on variety.

Common sense will guide you when to pick your tomatoes. Pick them too soon and they may offer you a bland taste. Enjoy those tomatoes!
WHICH CAME FIRST, THE BEETLE OR THE GRUB?

Diane K. DeWitte, UM Extension Educator

This summer’s weather is nearly perfect! Our spring allowed for timely planting and we’ve enjoyed regular rains since then. Gardens and crops look outstanding as June turns into July.

Reports from the MN Department of Agriculture indicate that pests in the area are having a good summer, too. Recent communication from MDA tells us that Japanese beetles are emerging around the state.

Blue Earth County is part of the confirmed distribution area of Japanese beetle (Popillia japonica), so this is one to watch for in your garden. Because I lived south of here for many years, my own experience with Japanese beetle is extensive. I tried growing a few roses for a time and the dastardly beetle could defoliate a rose in a day! They loved soybean blooms, so they were also a menace to production agriculture.

As with many insects we see today, JB came to this country accidentally and is not a major pest in Japan where it originated. There are some naturally occurring biological controls of JB, but they don’t survive in Minnesota.

Adult JB emerges now, in early July, and mates, lays eggs, and feeds. You can expect to see adult JB feeding for 6 to 8 weeks, after which it will die. The legacy it has left is striking. A female JB can lay up to 60 eggs in a season.

Eggs hatch in late July and the grubs begin feeding in August. They chew the roots of your grass, and signs of their feeding include brown patches in your lawn. Pull up a patch of the turf, and it will roll back easily.

As summer ends and soil temps get to 60 degrees and lower, grubs will move deeper into the soil profile to overwinter. They will remain there until the soil warms next spring when they can move upward, hatch and continue the cycle.

If you find JB in your lawn or garden, trying to eradicate the adult is not particularly effective. Pheromone traps have been used in other parts of the country, and they attract JB to a site without catching them, so the feeding damage is actually worse than if there were no trap.

Your best strategy to eradicate JB is to go for the grubs! Granular insecticide applied with a spreader to your lawn in late July and August will reduce the grub population and therefore reduce your headache next summer.

Check the UM Extension link at http://www.extension.umn.edu/garden/insects/find/japanese-beetles/ for complete details to treat your lawn for JB grubs.

Adult JB is a shiny, distinctive beetle, so it’s not tough to identify. When you see JB feeding on your flowers, you know that you could have a white grub issue in your lawn.

Be sure to scout first to determine whether you have a grub problem in your turf.

Now is the time to take action against the grub!
WE’re ON THE RADIO TOO!

MN River Valley Master Gardeners appear on radio KTOE, AM 1420, on the second Monday of the month through October. Joyce Wilcox and other Master Gardeners join Pete Steiner on “Talk of the Town” to discuss the latest lawn and garden conditions, and to address disease and insect problems we’re currently seeing. Often they answer listener questions, too!

Harvey Hesse and Barb Lamson appear weekly on KMSU radio – 89.7 FM—discussing the latest plant and garden issues. Their programs also run on KTOE on Sunday mornings.

MN River Valley Master Gardeners hosts a weekly open house at Glenwood Gardens ~324 Glenwood Avenue, Mankato~

Saturday mornings in July and August 9:00-11:00 a.m.

Stop by to visit and tour the gardens, get some questions answered, or bring a sample for diagnosis.

Glenwood Gardens has been developed to demonstrate to gardeners and homeowners which trees, shrubs, annuals, perennial and grasses grow most successfully in the Mankato area.

Searching for a tree that isn’t maple, spruce or ash? Have a look at our specimen trees: Amur maackia, Thornless honey locust, Ohio Buckeye, Gingko biloba, and more!

Great weather and plenty of moisture have made the Glenwood Gardens monstrous this year! Saturday mornings the gardeners will be thinning plants and picking berries—stop in to visit and take home a plant for your garden or a sample for your kitchen!

JOIN US AT GLENWOOD GARDENS THIS SUMMER!

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES CLOSEBY

The Blue Earth County Community Farm regularly needs helpers to weed, harvest, & plant. Produce from this farm goes to local food assistance programs.

Volunteers are welcome at the farm between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. on Tuesdays & Thursdays. Located at 174 Indian Lake Road, it’s in Weagel Park at the corner of Hwy 66 and Indian Lake Road. Check Blue Earth County Community Farm website or Facebook page to sign up.
BLUE EARTH COUNTY FAIR COMING!
The 156th annual Blue Earth County Fair will be held in Garden City, MN on July 30 through August 1.

Open class entries can be made Wednesday, July 29 from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. All entries will be judged on Thursday, except flowers will be judged on Wednesday evening.

The MN River Valley Master Gardeners will once again host an education and information booth at the Fair.

The Senior Day program will be held on Thursday July 30, beginning at 8:00 a.m. A pork loin lunch grilled by the Blue Earth County Pork Producers will be served beginning at 11:30 a.m.

The Blue Earth County Farm Family of the Year will be recognized at 6:00 p.m. on Saturday, August 1. UM Extension is pleased to honor the 2015 Farm Family, David & Marilyn Lynch and Mike & Amy Lynch and their families. The Lynch families farm southwest of Pemberton on a diversified crop and livestock operation.

GARDENERS’ FOOD SAFETY POINTERS
As we begin to harvest our garden produce or make delicious selections from the Farmer’s Markets, it’s critical to observe these important food safety practices.

Wash all produce thoroughly before eating it. No matter how lovely it looks, it needs cleaning before you prepare it. Recent food safety training revealed that these six items top the problem list when you’re handling fresh produce:

- Melons
- Leafy greens
- Tomatoes
- Berries
- Green onions
- Herbs

To prevent spreading germs or contaminating your fresh food, remember these three simple points:

1) **Hand-washing:** Wash your hands with soap and warm water for a minimum of 20 seconds. Make sure that you wash your palms, top of your hands and wrists. Scrub your fingertips into your palm to clean the nail bed. Rinse and dry with a single-use towel.

2) **Clean & Tidy:** Make sure all of your equipment is clean and that the work area where you pick produce is tidy. Keep pets and pet litter boxes away from the area where you process or consolidate produce. Keep livestock & poultry out of these areas, too.

3) **Sharp & Cool:** Harvest and process produce with a sharp, clean knife.

Get produce to a cool place immediately after harvesting.

Find more information at the following website: http://www.extension.umn.edu/food/food-safety/

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