

Growing Tomatoes 101

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Tomatoes are the most popular vegetable grown in the Florida Keys home garden. In the Keys, tomato growing season starts at the end of October through April.

If you do not have a yard, try planting your tomatoes in a five-gallon plastic bucket. Make sure to cut drain holes. You will then need to situate each container so that it receives a minimum of 6-8 hours of sun per day, in order for the plant to bear fruit. You can make your own soil mix using all or some of the following components: garden compost, sphagnum peat, Perlite, vermiculite, and coarse sand, plus dolomitic lime. You want to aim for a product with 40-50% organic components, and a pH of about 6.5. If you buy a potting mix instead, make sure it states that it is designed for container gardening.

People with a lot of space that meets the sunlight requirements can grow tomatoes in their yard. If you find it difficult to dig a hole, then create a raised bed. Soil in a raised bed can easily be replenished, avoiding the potential build up of pests or disease. A raised bed contains four walls made from rot resistant wood, plastic lumber, local rock, or concrete block. It should be a minimum of 18 inches deep if you cannot dig down into the soil at all. It can be shallower if you are able to dig through the rock. Dig as deeply as you can, screen out the larger rocks and use the loosened soil in the raised bed. Combine equal parts of 50-50 mix, composted manure and peat moss with the native soil, mix well and fill in the raised bed.

In choosing which tomato varieties to plant, you need to decide what growth habit you are looking for. Tomatoes have a determinate and indeterminate growth habit. Determinate tomato plants have a bushy growth habit that produces a crop of fruit over a short season. Indeterminate tomato

plants grow into vines that need to be trellised and have a longer growing season.

From the first day you plant your tomatoes, you should begin fertilizing them, using a 6-8-8 or similar fertilizer at the rate of 1/3 pound per ten foot of row (remember that a one pound coffee can hold approximately two pounds of fertilizer). On planting day, place two bands of fertilizer about 3 to 6 inches on either side of the plant. Thereafter, fertilize every three to four weeks while your tomatoes are growing, at one half this rate. If your tomato plants are growing in the ground then you will need to spray the foliage with a liquid fertilizer containing zinc, copper, iron, boron, and manganese every three to five weeks.

Tomatoes are going to need one inch of water a week. Since you are planting them in the dry season, you'll need to provide the water. Apply the water in the morning, and only to the roots, not the foliage.

For more information about growing tomatoes, log onto the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/VH028> for the publication, "Tomatoes in the Florida Garden."