

It's tomato planting season

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It's time to daydream about fresh BLT sandwiches and large slices of homegrown tomato on just-made garden salads.

Meaning it's time to get your tomato plants in the ground.

May is generally the recommended time for planting tomatoes and other warm-season vegetables like cucumbers, squash, melons and beans because they thrive in warm soil, not just warm air temperatures.

Succession plantings can be done now through early July to keep late tomatoes ripening in your fall garden.

When you shop for tomato plants, consider planting both heirloom and hybrid plants. Hybrids are prolific, heirlooms are flavorful.

To get hybrids, plant breeders intentionally cross-pollinate two different varieties, trying to produce offspring with the best traits from both parents.

There are many hybrids to choose from, so pick the types that do best in your growing conditions: compact varieties for pots, larger tomato plants for in the ground, for instance. Bonnie Plants, a label you see in places like Lowe's, Home Depot, independent garden centers and even grocery stores, produced the hybrid Bonnie Original tomato in 1967, breeding it for good taste and improved disease resistance.

Heirlooms continue to gain in popularity, particularly since they have a legacy of good flavor. But it's not just diehard heirloom lovers favoring them. One in five American households indicates interest in heirloom fruits, berries and vegetables.

Heirlooms, like tomatoes Cherokee Purple, Black Krim and Chocolate Cherry by Bonnie Plants, come from seed handed down from generation to generation. They are open-pollinated by insects or wind, not human intervention.

Tomatoes from a long line of seeds feature firm texture, good color and reliable shape. Unlike hybrid seeds where the seeds cannot be used over and over again, you can save the seeds from your heirloom varieties and plant them again the next year.

When you grow heirlooms, you need to give them a little extra TLC because they are not like hybrids, which are specially bred to resist disease and thrive in poor growing conditions.

To grow reliable tomatoes of any kind, plant them in full sun, give them organic-rich, good-draining soil and mulch them to prevent weeds. Water tomatoes at the root zone, keeping the foliage dry to help avoid foliar diseases.

In addition to growing tomatoes in large pots and in the ground, you can also easily grow tomatoes in straw bales.

Here's how:

Get your bales. Start with a bale of wheat straw. Bales sitting out in the weather give you a head start, because they need to rot before you plant.

Put them in sun. Place the bales in full sun where they can stay all summer, because once they start to rot, they're not very mobile. Don't remove the wire or cord around them. Using a stake at both ends helps hold twine-bound bales together when the twine rots.

Prep your bales. It takes 10 days to prepare your bales:

Days 1-3: Water the bales thoroughly and keep them wet.

Days 4-6: Sprinkle the bales with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup ammonium nitrate (a fertilizer with a 32-0-0 formula) per day per bale and water well. Local feed and seed stores typically carry this fertilizer, which entices microbes to feed on the straw, causing it to rot.

Days 7-9: Cut back to $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of ammonium nitrate per bale per day and continue to water well.

Day 10: Use no more ammonium nitrate but add 1 cup 10-10-10 fertilizer per bale per day and water them well.

Plant your tomatoes and vegetables right into the bale, using your hand to pull apart the bale and insert the roots. Each bale should accommodate two tomato or four pepper plants.

Add other stuff. Seed other vegetables, such as cucumbers, squash, beans, cantaloupe and watermelon, into the soil mix on top. Three yellow squash, six to eight cucumbers or 12 to 15 bean seeds per bale is about the limit. Don't plant corn, okra or other tall vegetables in the bales.

Feed them lightly. Over the summer, the bales may need 10-10-10 fertilizer once a month, depending on the crop.

Recycle bales. Bales can be used again for the next crop, or they can be recycled in the compost pile or used as mulch.