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7 tips for planting tomatoes

By **Kathy Van Mullekom**
Newport News, Va.) Daily Press

Between now and July 1, you can put in a succession of tomato plants for late summer and fall harvests. Green tomatoes can be picked and each wrapped in newspaper for ripening for later use.

Here are some tips from Bonnie Plants (www.bonnieplants.com) on how to plant tomatoes.

Bonnie Plants, packaged in biodegradable pots, are sold nationwide at independent garden centers and big-box stores.

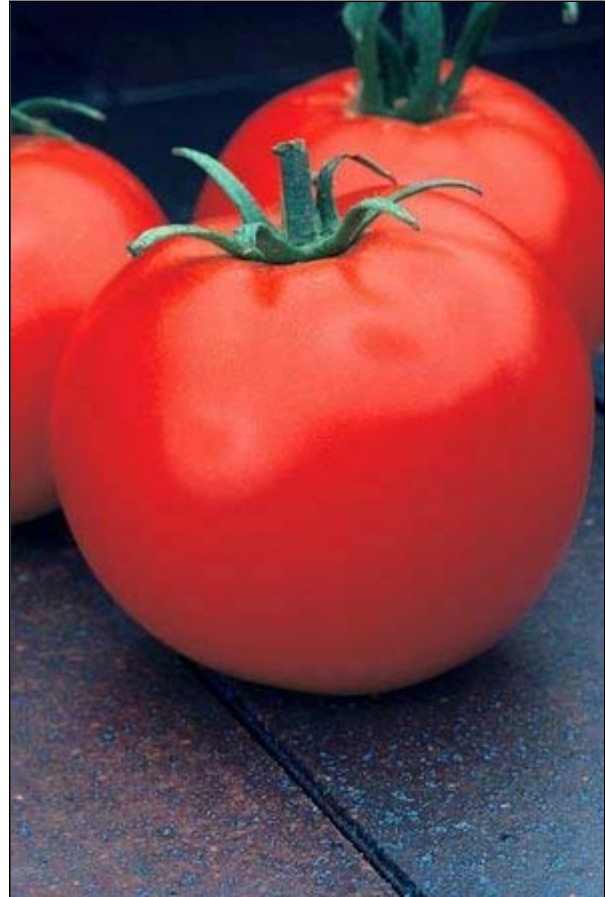
Prep the ground. Loosen the ground and add aged organic compost, working it thoroughly into the soil. Dig a hole as deep as the plant is tall.

Slip plant from pot, if in plastic. Carefully remove the plant. Don't tug on the plant stem or you can sever it from the roots. If roots grow out of the bottom of the pot, cut them away and squeeze and twist the pot off the plant. If your plant grows in a biodegradable pot, tear off the bottom half of the pot to make sure roots are in constant contact with the ground soil. Crumble the pot pieces into the hole or compost them.

Untangle roots in plastic pots only. If roots grow in a matted circle, gently break them out of the mat in two to three places, but don't tear them away from the root ball. They should dangle so they can grow into the soil. If you plant is in a biodegradable pot, skip this step.

Bury two-thirds of the plant. Set the plant in the hole so two-thirds of it is buried. Laying the plant on its side is OK, as long as you angle it so the very top remains above ground. Roots will sprout all along the buried stem to make a stronger plant. You can pinch off the lower leaves if you prefer, but it's not necessary.

Fertilize. Mix fertilizer into the pile of soil that will go back into the hole. Fertilize according to recommendations from a soil test. If you haven't done a soil test, use a time-release fertilizer because it doesn't leach. Using an organic fertilizer is even better.



COURTESY BONNIE PLANTS / MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS
Fertilizing, watering and mulching are among the must-dos for a good tomato harvest.

Water well. Water your tomato plants thoroughly and keep them watered when there is no rainfall. Plants need an inch of water per week. Soaker hoses are best for all plants because moisture gets directly to the root zone. Overhead watering promotes fungal diseases, especially on tomatoes in humid climates.

Mulch, mulch, mulch. Mulch your vegetables with pine needles, straw or compost to keep moisture in and weeds out.

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