

The Challenge of Growing Tomatoes in Coastal South Carolina (Hilton Head Island)

The following information is to get you started growing tomatoes. It can be very frustrating especially if you have raised them in other climate zones where it can be relatively easy.

Here are a few tips.

- The best varieties: When selecting tomatoes varieties they can be either Determinate or Indeterminate. Determinate plants set and ripen their fruit all at one time. Indeterminate ones ripen all season long. According to Clemson Cooperative Extension, the best varieties for this area include Better Boy (Hybrid or F1), Brandywine, Homestead Big Beef (Hybrid or F1), and Celebrity (Hybrid or F1). If you want to grow cherry tomatoes, try the Super Sweet 100 (Hybrid or F1) or the Sweet Million (Hybrid or F1). Plum tomatoes that grow well in South Carolina include Roma, Mama Leone and the Viva Italia Hybrid. If you cannot find these varieties make sure that you get plants with the most letters after their name designating disease resistances especially to wilt: **V** verticillium wilt; **F** Fusarium wilt.
- Choosing the right place: A tomato plant does not take a great deal of space but needs to be easily accessible. Do not plant tomatoes in the same place each year.
- Prepare the soil. Begin preparing the soil by tilling the area 8-10m inches deep. Work in 2-3 inches of compost or organic matter into the top 6 inches.
- Planting time: Spring: March 25-April 10 and Fall July 25-30. When planting add a handful of fertilizer and work it into the soil to give the plant a strong start. Once the first tomatoes develop from blossoms into golf-size globes, feed the plants by working in 2-3 tablespoons of fertilizer around the base of the plant every 3-4 weeks.
- Mulching of the plants is recommended for a number of reasons. It keeps moisture in; it regulates soils temperature; it smothers weeds; it improves the soil; AND very importantly, it prevents disease and fruit rot by keeping water from splashing on the soils absorbing bacteria and fungi, and bouncing up onto your plants. You can use either organic or inorganic material. Mulch each plant 2-4 inches deep and at least out to the drip line. Pull back the mulch 1-2 inches from the stem to help prevent from stem rot.
- Watering: Consistent watering produces stronger plants and larger fruit. In the height of summer, water 2-3 times a week. Water at soil line. Avoid overhead watering, which spreads diseases.
- Stake or cage for success. Plant support allows more light and air to reach branches, which in turn produces more fruit and reduces diseases when it is hot and humid. You can select from at least five ways to stake your tomatoes: cage; single stake; Florida weave; vertical string trellis; and fence panel. For details on each go to: thefreerangelife.com/5-ways-stake-tomatoes.
- Trim or prune as plants grow: Remove suckers and extra interior stalks to allow maximum air circulation and to help prevent disease in this very humid climate.
- A great source of information is: **Tomato Dirt Crash Course: 10 MUST-KNOW TOMATO GROWING TIPS**, BY Kathy Widenhouse at: www.tomatodirt.com