

# The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

May 2008

## Tips for Growing Tomatoes

Elizabeth Wahle, horticulture specialist

The tomato is one of the most popular vegetables for the home garden. Its popularity is most likely due to its many culinary uses and its ability to produce a big crop under many growing conditions.

Although the tomato will grow in almost any kind of soil, it grows best in soil that is fertile, well drained, and in good tilth. It also needs plenty of sunshine and water, so avoid planting in the shade of buildings and trees. And although you may be anxious for that first home-grown tomato, it doesn't pay to rush the planting season. With the intermittent cool, damp weather typical for April, early set plants don't normally grow well without protective measures. Many protective devices are available—such as a cloche (glass bell), floating row covers, Wall o Water, or, for those who recycle, milk jugs.

For successful tomato production, select a good variety and healthy plants. Many of the heirloom varieties such as 'Mortgage Lifter' and 'Yellow Pear' are available and may perform satisfactorily. However, there are many new varieties and hybrids on the market that may perform better and have some resistance to troublesome diseases. Compare the new varieties with your old favorites. When buying transplants, plants should be dark-green, medium-tall, heavy-stemmed, and without open flowers or fruit. Avoid the tall, leggy, pale-green or yellow plants because these will grow slower and will not mature as readily. Buy the best plants possible, either potted or in flats.

It takes 65 to 80 days for most small vigorous transplants to mature into a crop of fruit. Oversized plants will yield a few fruit earlier than this. With most plants and varieties, the maximum yield and quality will come in mid- to late July, but healthy plants will continue fruiting until frost.

To stake, cage, or to let them ramble on the ground is your decision at planting time. Staked plants can be planted 18 inches apart in the row; caged plants need to be 2 to 3 feet apart, and non-staked plants should be 3 to 6 feet apart in the row. Yields should be 5 to 15 pounds from staked plants, 10 to 20 pounds from caged plants, and 15 to 30 pounds from ground plants. But, realize that disease incidence and slug damage can be significantly higher if plants are not staked or caged.

You can reduce maintenance time by applying a mulch to smother the weeds and improve soil moisture conditions. Good mulch materials include plastic mulch and organic materials like peat moss, straw, and ground corncobs. Hay is not generally recommended because of the seed content; grass clippings can pose the same problem. Organic mulches are normally applied after planting, and plastic mulches are usually applied prior to planting.

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# After the Bloom is Gone

Tony Bratsch, horticulture educator



This year's cool, wet spring gave us an extended period of time to enjoy crocus, daffodils, tulips, and other spring bulbs, as well as spring-flowering shrubs. But, when the flowers fade, we need to take measures to ensure good return bloom for next spring.

For spring bulbs that have completed their flowering, a single application of a soluble fertilizer such as Miracle Gro™ will help keep the foliage vigorous and supply nutrients to new offsets and bulblets that will develop underground from the larger bulbs in the coming months.

Often, bulb foliage is prematurely mowed or trimmed back to allow other perennials space to grow and bloom. But, we need to let the foliage grow until it begins to fade and go dormant in the summer. One way to reduce the coarse appearance of bulb foliage is to gather it in bundles, securing with a rubber band to keep it neat in appearance until the foliage yellows. This method is effective for daffodils, but it may damage bulbs such as tulips because of their more brittle foliage. The spent flower stem can also be removed to improve appearance and to keep seeds from developing, thus increasing nutrients to developing bulbs.

Once the foliage has yellowed, it can be trimmed back to ground level. If you are planning on adding more bulbs in the fall to thicken or add dimension to your bulb display, be sure to mark existing bulb sites to avoid digging damage. For more tips on bulb selection and care, visit the U of I Extension "Bulbs and More" website at [www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/bulbs/](http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/bulbs/).

Another late spring garden task is to prune spring-blooming shrubs soon after their flowers begin to fade. Pruning now will help invigorate the plant and, if done promptly, will allow plenty of time for next spring's flower buds to develop through the summer and early fall on this year's new growth. Plants such as lilac, flowering quince, and forsythia are good examples of spring-blooming shrubs common to our region. They can be pruned each year by removing a small percentage—10 to 25 percent—of older canes at ground level.

By removing older, less vigorous, disease- or insect-damaged canes, the plant is gradually renewed, allowing new shoot development at the plant base. Older branches can also be trimmed back and shaped up for appearance and to reduce overall plant size. Follow pruning with a light fertilization, using a general analysis fertilizer such as granular 13-13-13 (1/4 to 1/2 cup per plant) or a soluble fertilizer such as Miracle Gro™ at the labeled rate.

Taking care of spring bulbs and pruning spring flowering shrubs now helps to ensure an even better display next year.

# Question Corner

Answers provided by U of I Extension experts Tony Bratsch and Ed Billingsley

*Q.* Last month, your article on asparagus said not to use salt for weed control. I understand how it can affect the soil for other future plants. But, what if you only plant asparagus in that location every year? My asparagus is in an area where I would never want to plant other vegetables. Is salt okay to use in that case?

*A.* Asparagus is tolerant to a fair degree of salt in the soil and is found growing naturally near seaside areas. Although sprinkling salt on the soil surface has been a long-time remedy to control weeds in asparagus beds, the advent of consumer-available herbicides such as Preen makes weed control just as easy and less detrimental to the soil.

In answer to your question, excess salt in and on the soil can lead to gradual decline in soil structure over time. This can affect water penetration as well as soil nutrient availability and uptake, potentially affecting asparagus growth and yield in future years. Salt-damaged soils can become crusty and “slick” over time.

The reality is that salt application to control weeds is not an environmentally-friendly approach. Many dollars have been spent trying to reclaim soil areas destroyed by oil well salt water discharge in the Midwest and, in the West, sodic agricultural soils

caused by steady evaporation of soil salts to the surface. Salt-damaged soils can be reclaimed by adding gypsum (calcium sulfate which helps to loosen soil structure), by leaching, by flooding with water and, to some extent, by adding organic matter to improve damaged structure.

*Q.* I want to add some crabapple trees to my yard but have been told apple scab will be a problem. Is this true?

*A.* Apple scab is a serious fungal disease that affects both apple and crabapple trees in southern Illinois. So, your best option is to pick a variety that is resistant to scab. Here are two you may want to consider.

‘Gibbs Golden Gage’ has a pink bloom with yellow fruit about 1 inch in size and will reach a height of 20 feet.

‘Coralburst’ has a pink bloom with red fruit 5/8 inch in size. This tree produces few fruits and is dwarf, growing to less than a 12-foot height.

There are several more crabapple varieties that are resistant to scab. When buying, look for varieties that are resistant to scab, fire blight, and other diseases.



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# Gardening in Small Spaces

Ed Billingsley, guest columnist



I can't tell you how many times people have told me they have no place to garden. I always ask them, "Do you have 1 square foot?" Then, the conversation turns to options available for a small space.

Whether you want to grow flowers or vegetables, container gardening can solve the problem of small spaces. How can you grow anything in a square foot? Well, how about stacking some pots. Begin with a 12-inch pot with a 5/8-inch dowel in the center, then a 10-inch, an 8-inch, and a 6-inch. Pot size can vary, but you will have a tower of pots ready for plants. You might plant a tower of petunias or perhaps a tower of vegetables such as green beans, cucumbers, or tomatoes ready for the kitchen.

Place your tower in a location where you won't have to move it. This structure can be heavy and awkward. Fill each pot with a quality potting soil. Keep the plants watered and fertilized on a regular basis. The result will be an edible delight or a visual treat, depending on your plant choice. So, start stacking those pots and make that 1 square foot area productive with your favorite flowers or vegetables.



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