

Tomatoes and Peppers - Tips for a Successful Harvest

Tomatoes and Peppers are warm season vegetables, which means they require warm weather to grow and produce fruit. They will not thrive if nighttime temperatures are below 50 degrees. They also need a minimum of 6-8 hours of sunshine a day and consistently moist, but not soggy, soil. These all present challenges to the Tri-Lakes gardener. Below are some tips to help overcome these challenges and enjoy a bountiful harvest!

Make sure your soil temperature is at least 60 degrees before planting outside. The soil in raised beds or containers will warm up faster than the ground. Covering the soil with plastic for a week or two will help speed up the warming.

Choosing varieties with shorter days to maturity ranging from 55-75 days will enable an earlier harvest. There are also several cool-tolerant hybrid and heirloom tomato varieties available including Stupice, Siberian, Oregon Spring, Glacier and Celebrity that are good choices for short growing seasons.

We can be well into June before our nighttime temperatures are consistently above 50 degrees. Using row covers, frost cloth, or 'water walls', which all help retain heat, will allow you to trick your plants into thinking it is warmer than it is, enabling you to set them out earlier. These same structures will also protect young transplants from our high winds.

Prior to planting, remove all flower buds from the plants, and remove the bottom sets of leaves. Plant to the depth of the next set of leaves. This will promote a stronger root system, and thus a healthier plant. Though it is tempting to leave the first buds on the plant, in hopes of an earlier harvest, it actually inhibits overall plant growth.

When selecting a fertilizer for your tomatoes and peppers, make sure it contains calcium, which is necessary to help prevent blossom end rot. Avoid fertilizers high in nitrogen as that will promote lush growth, but little fruit. Keep in mind that plants grown in containers have less nutrients available to them from the soil as do plants in the ground, so they will require more from you. Also, organic fertilizers will feed the soil as well as the plants, while chemical fertilizers feed only the plant.

A consistent water supply is necessary for healthy plants and fruit. Allowing plants to dry out, then soaking them to 'make up for it', stresses the plant and can cause fruit to crack. Plants in containers may need to be watered twice a day during the heat of summer. Mulching your plants, whether in beds or containers, will help retain moisture and reduce evaporation. Always make sure plants are well watered before applying fertilizers.



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