

Garden Line - February 2009

by Brent Moon - HPARD Urban Garden Manager

February is the traditional start of the spring vegetable gardening season here in the Houston area. Hopefully, by now you have your vegetable garden topped off with compost, tilled, and ready for planting. For those of you who love tomatoes (and who doesn't?), timing is critical. Tomatoes are heat lovers, but only to a certain point.

The key to growing tomatoes here in Texas is to purchase early maturing varieties such as 'Early Girl' and to get them planted as early as you can. Mid-to late February is an ideal time in the Houston area. You might have to cover them once or twice if we get a cold snap **but the key is to get them going before it gets too hot!** get over 90 degrees and, more importantly, niranje, tomatoes tend to stop fruiting. You may see flowers, but no fruit will develop. This is why planting early is so important. You temperatures get too hot.



which indicate that the tomato plant you are about to purchase is resistant to the diseases verticillium, fusarium, and to nematodes.

When purchasing tomatoes at your local nursery or garden store, look for stout stems and nice green foliage. Pass on anything that looks yellow or spindly. Igplant at the level the plant was growing in the pot. Tomatoes produce roots that will sprout along the main stem, so plant deep. Tomatoes can be planted up to their first set or two of leaves. This will eventually give you more roots below ground and produce a stouter plant, less likely to fall over. I do this every year with great results.

Be sure to check the tag for important information such as the days to maturity. Look for plants that mature in the 60-70 day range. This will help you to get fruit before it gets too hot. Also, look on the tag for the letters VFN,



Tomatoes enjoy fertilizer in order to produce nice big fruits. Be careful not to overdo it, though, as too much fertilizer will cause the plant to grow more leaves and stems than fruit. I normally fertilize at planting time, then again two weeks later. After that I let the plants tell me when they need fertilizer. If your leaves start to look yellow, they may need a little fertilizer.

Be sure to place wire cages arothat they don't break under the weight of all that delicious fruit. An alternative to staking is to buy one of the Bush/Patio (or determinate) varieties that naturally stay short and stocky.

Some good tomato varieties for this area include: Overall, Crimson Carmello, Champion, Arkansas Traveler, Big Beef, Merced, Celebrity, Bingo, Early Girl, Yellow and Red Grape, Better Bush, Juliet, Sweet Gold, Supersweet 100, and Roma. Some supposedly heat tolerant varieties might be worth trying, such as Heat Wave and Sunmaster. Some of the cherry type tomatoes will carry over into summer but fruit size tends to get smaller as time goes on.



This is also the time of year to do any last minute tidying up in your landscape before ornamental plants start growing again. Trim back any perennials that you may not have gotten to over the winter. Apply a new coat of mulch to prevent weed growth and conserve moisture for the long summer ahead. Be sure not to prune any spring flowering plants such as azaleas now, however, as this will remove their flower buds. They should be pruned immediately after flowering.



Your fall and winter annuals are likely still looking OK, but soon it will be time to pull them out. Start thinking about what type of spring and summer annuals you want to grow in their place. Spring annuals for our area include geraniums, marigolds, petunia, and alyssum. These will all do well until the summer heat really kicks in. Once it gets hot, consider the following annuals: angelonia, begonia, cleome, coleus, celosia, cosmos, gazania, gaillardia, gomphrena, impatiens, salvia, vinca, and zinnia.