

Markham Arboretum: Tomatoes made easy

There are lots of tips and tricks, but here are 4 basic things to help grow a successful crop of tomatoes.

1. **Dirt wrap** - you know how some spas offer to surround you up to your chin in warm, clean, mud? Well, that's exactly how tomatoes like to be planted. Ever notice all those hairs on the stem of a young plant? Well those hairs are actually potential roots, ready to develop and suck up nutrients.

Just trim off the lower leaves, nestle the plant in up to its leafy chin and give it a great, big initial drink for its summer heat treatment.

2. **Feed me** - tomatoes are notoriously heavy feeders. I recommend that you feed them well when you plant, and then about once a month after planting.

For the initial planting, I add the following to each 12 inch deep hole:

- **1 fishead** for a calcium boost, which guards against blossom end rot. I got mine last year at Ranch 99 for under \$1.00/lb, but any Asian-style market is likely to have them;
- **3-4 crushed eggshells**, also for calcium, which I saved over the winter;
- **1 handful of bone meal** (from Navlet's) which is rich in phosphorus and critical to fruit production;
- **1 modest handful of worm castings**, also from Navlet's, for a delicious first feed;
- **the recommended dose of mycorrhizae** from [Bountiful Gardens](#), where you can read about the amazing things this product does.

Then, after the plant is lowered into the hole and the soil carefully, gently backfilled, I top it off with nice drink of Dr. Earth's 5-7-4 plant food.

For successive feedings, just use a balanced a balanced organic [fertilizer](#) that emphasizes phosphorus, e.g., a 4-6-4. Phosphorus, the second number in all fertilizer formulas, is key for fruit production. Many good organic fertilizers can be purchased at your local nursery. My business partner and I got our plants off to their great start last year with combinations of products from [Dr. Earth](#), Whitney Farms (currently, a Scotts company), and [E.B. Stone](#).

3. **I'll have another correctly-sized/timed sip** - be consistent in watering tomatoes after planting to avoid "bingeing". It's not good to drown them one day and follow up with a week of neglect. You can easily monitor the plants' needs by sticking your finger down a couple of inches into the soil. If it's dry, they may need a drink, but maybe not: tomatoes like a bit of drying, even to the point of mild wilting. In fact, when our plants are well established, like late July / early August, we water only about every 2 weeks. Mulch helps - it slows down moisture loss and keeps roots cooler by providing shade for the soil. Put the mulch up to about 6 inches from the stem; that way, certain pests won't be able to stage a sneak attack under the cover of the mulch.

4. **One or 2 last things** - rotate your tomato sites year over year for disease control. Many of the most common tomato pests live in the soil, but you can usually outrun 'em by planting in different locations. And really: tomatoes like the sun, so don't expect much if they don't get at least 6 hours of it.