

GROWING HEIRLOOM TOMATOES

Rodger Winn

Heirloom tomatoes are the parents of modern hybrids, in the last half century hybridizers have lost the taste in modern tomatoes. Heirlooms far exceed taste in tests over hybrids. Following a few simple steps and understanding how an heirloom grows will ensure a bountiful crop of delicious tasting Heirloom tomatoes.



Bad

The biggest problem with Heirlooms is the size of the plant. Large plants that are not adequately supported cause the limbs to break and vines sprawling on the ground will result in rapid spread of foliar disease which reduces yield, affects flavor and will kill the plant. To prevent this, the first step to take is providing a good support structure. The cages sold at big box stores for tomatoes will not work. These are better suited for peppers, eggplants and Dahlias.



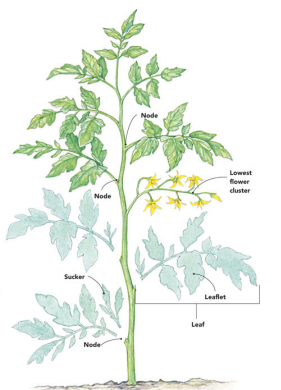
Good

Use a 5ft high fence with 4x4 openings or concrete reinforcing wire made into 2ft wide cages. There are numerous methods that can be used as long as it is a minimum of 5ft tall and solidly anchored into the ground. T-Posts make good anchors and are easily removed.

Step 2 is proper spacing. Good air circulation helps keep leaves dry, minimizing disease. To provide maximum air flow plants should not touch each other and there should be plenty of room to walk around the cage without touching the plants. Cages need to be 5ft apart and plants grown on a fence or trellis 4ft foot apart.

Step 3 is fertilizer. Tomatoes require a continuous supply of nutrients but too much Nitrogen produces a lot of plant growth and few blooms. Phosphorus is what is needed for good bloom and fruit set. At planting add a good cup full of bone meal for Phosphorus and Calcium which aids in preventing blossom end rot and 2-3 shovels of home made compost or Mushroom compost (one bag will do three plants), mix well into a 2ft round deep hole. When the plant begins to bloom fertilize with a low Nitrogen natural fish fertilizer as directed by the manufacturer, or 1cup fish meal or a gallon of homemade compost tea, or a good fertilizer for tomatoes such as Epsoma tomato tone worked into the soil. (The middle fertilizer number should be at least twice the first number) I use Neptune's fish emulsion (2-4-1) but any low nitrogen fertilizer is fine. Use the fish emulsion or tea every three to four weeks.

Step 3 is Mulch. Mulch adds nutrients, retains moisture, regulates soil temp, and blocks weeds. But the biggest benefit is keeping the leaves of the tomato from touching the soil or having soil splashed on the leaves by the rain. Foliar diseases are the #1 problem with tomatoes. Bacterial and fungal are the most common culprits, they are spread by the wind and live in the soil. Soil that gets on the leaves could result in disease spreading to the plant. There is no cure for Bacteria disease. Good air circulation and keeping leaves dry will limit foliar disease problems. 6-12inches of mulch is ideal.



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Step 4 is to prune. The plants need to be pruned to limit size and keep the plant within the bounds of the garden or support structure. Too much plant reduces air flow which causes fungal and bacterial growth on the leaves resulting in death to the plants. As the plant grows remove all the leaves and side shoots below the first bloom cluster. Mulch should cover up to this point and 30inches out. After the first bloom Cluster the plant will fork, allow only the first fork for container plants, trellised and caged plants can allow 2-3more forks but all side shoots must be removed. The side shoots will develop at each leaf on every limb. If these are not removed the plant will have more limbs than the roots can feed and too much plant to allow good air flow. Side shoots are easily removed by pinching them out when they are less than an inch long or by simply grasping at the base and gently pull down to remove larger shoots. Once the plant is waste high only prune to keep in



bounds with its growing area.

Step 5 is water. Never overhead water always water at the base to keep the leaves dry. The most important aspect of growing tomatoes disease free without sprays is to keep the leaves dry. Dry leaves with plenty of air circulation will help ensure a disease free long fruiting season of naturally grown delicious Heirloom tomatoes.

For more information and for hands on demonstrations of growing, saving seed and tasting dozens of great tomatoes make plans to attend the 5th annual tomato tasting in Little Mountain SC on Saturday July 17. Check out my website for more information www.rodgersheirlooms.com