

Extension Notes

Personal Column for March 23, 2010

By Gary Hall, Iowa State University Regional Extension Education Director

Starting Tomatoes Early

A gentleman stopped in the office to ask for some information about growing tomatoes. He may have seen some of those little tomato plants that are showing up in some stores nowadays and he caught the spring gardening bug or perhaps he was wanting to just get an early start.

If you would like to have your tomato plants produce earlier in the year, there are certain things to keep in mind. Most people who try to get a jump on the season set their tomatoes out early and hope they do well. However, that is often not a good plan, as tomatoes have to have certain requirements before they will grow well. Those requirements are an acceptable soil temperature for root growth and an acceptable air temperature for both plant growth and fruit set.

Root Growth: Tomatoes need a soil temperature of at least 55 degrees to do well. Plastic mulch is most commonly used to warm the soil. Several days may be needed to raise the soil temperature. Check the soil temperature 2.5 inches deep in the soil at about 11 a.m. or go to www.extension.iastate.edu/cerrogordo and click on Daily Soil Temperature. You may wish to lay a drip irrigation line before installing the plastic to make watering more convenient.

Air Temperature: Plants must be protected from frost. Hot caps or water teepees are placed over the young plants to provide protection as well as a higher average temperature to encourage growth. Eventually the plants will outgrow the cover and start to develop flowers. But if the temperature goes below 55 degrees at night, tomato flowers may not set.

The plant is not hurt, but the blossom will not set fruit or, if it does set fruit, the fruit is often misshapen.

The trick is to set your transplants out as early as possible without harming the plant. By making sure the soil and air temperatures are adequate you should be well on your way to a bountiful tomato harvest.

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