



Urban Harvest

## Get Planting Date Right for Home-Grown Tomatoes

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*Originally published in the Houston Chronicle*



If you grow tomatoes from seed, you can have many varieties and delicious food.

Sounds nice, right?

It is nice, since tomatoes can be cooked in so many cuisines as well as eaten fresh in salads and on sandwiches. But mass-marketed tomatoes typically are bred to resist squashing and rotting during their transnational voyage, and are not very tasty. So consequently, the tomato is the most popular farmers market vegetable and the most popular garden vegetable in southeast Texas.

Growing good tomatoes does take some knowledge, attention to many

In the several decades I have been vegetable gardening, I have had many failed crops. Tomatoes, however, never fail. Year after year we have a huge crop of fantastic ones in May and June, and a nice crop in November and December.

Just when the fresh tomatoes are gone in June, it is time to plant seeds for the fall crop, and just when the fresh tomatoes are gone in winter, it is time to plant seeds for the spring crop.



The Jaune Flame/Yellow Flame Tomato is a fine French tomato



The Paul Robeson tomato is a delicious and easy to grow black tomato

details and work. Our residents fail at tomatoes more than any other garden vegetable, but most of the problems can be avoided. Solutions to these will be explained in Tuesday's (7-9 p.m., Feb. 11) **Urban Harvest** class "Growing Great Tomatoes." Here I want to talk about the biggest problem.

Every June when I participate in the annual tomato tasting at the Urban Harvest farmers market, I get asked one question repeatedly: "My tomato plants grew well, but the flowers fell off and there aren't many fruit." Sometimes gardeners ask if

some bug is eating the flowers at night or if there weren't enough bees.

If the tomato never bloomed, it might be there were not eight hours of sunlight or it could be the grower used so much nitrogen fertilizer the plant wasn't stressed enough to reproduce. But if there were flowers but no fruit, it is not because of bugs or lack of bees. Nothing eats tomato flowers, and tomatoes are self-pollinating.

Rather, the problem is tomato pollen is mostly sterile when temperatures in the daytime are above 85 degrees; or at night are above 70 degrees or below 55 degrees. You therefore need to have the tomato in the ground and full of flowers when temperatures are in this range, and you need to plant transplants at the right date so this will happen.



Getting good tomatoes requires planting at the right time

From year to year, spring dates when tomato flowers will pollinate change because some days are hotter or colder than others. But tomato flowers are cagey -- they stay on the plant for several days waiting for the right temperature.

On average, **Intercontinental** Airport's dates when tomato flowers will set fruit are March 26 to May 12, and Oct. 3 to Nov. 8. **Hobby Airport's** are March 17 to May 15, and Sept. 29 to Nov. 13. Galveston's are March 7 to May 26, and Sept. 27 to Nov. 28. College Station's dates are April 2 to May 14, and Oct. 4 to Nov. 4.

Tomato varieties described as "early," "mid-season" and "late" are based on the number of days it takes for a plant to ripen its first fruit from seed. Since it typically takes five to six weeks for early and mid-season tomato transplants to produce flowers, ideal transplant planting dates are Galveston Jan. 24-31, Hobby Feb. 3, Intercontinental Feb. 14, and College Station Feb. 19.

These are typical dates. But no year is typical. If one year you have the transplants ready, and the forecast for the next week is balmy, you can plant them a week early. If in another year, the forecast for the next week is frigid and you can keep on growing them under lights or a greenhouse in warmth, then wait.

Whatever the year, you need to keep late-winter temperatures around your newly planted tomato warm. Either use clear plastic sheets around cages that have plastic bottles of water inside them or use devices such as Wall-O-Water to do this.

*Urban Harvest produces this column. Learn about gardening classes, community and school gardens, farmers markets, fruit tree sales and more at [urbanharvest.org](http://urbanharvest.org).*