

NEWS RELEASE
July 16, 2003

TOMATO GARDENING

BACKYARD HORTICULTURE

By Gary W. Hickman, Horticulture Advisor
University of California Cooperative Extension, Mariposa County

If your carefully nurtured garden tomato plants look fine, but have not produced many tomatoes, it may be just too hot. It turns out that even though the vine itself may not be hurt by the heat, tomato pollen does not make the proper connections in weather over about 90 degrees. Without effective pollination, the flowers will fall off and no fruit will be set. To make matters worse, a hot spell not only prevents tomato production while the heat wave is on, but it can interfere with fruit set for up to one week after temperatures return to normal.

Several commercial hormone sprays are available to improve tomato fruit set. However, if the problem is high temperature, even these sprays will not help. All you can do is wait and hope the weather cools.

There are many other reasons why your tomatoes may not be living up to expectations and, fortunately, we can do something about many of them. One common problem is the overuse of nitrogen fertilizer. This plant nutrient keeps the vine vigorous and a nice dark green color. However, when in this vegetative part of its growth, the tomato plant does not produce flowers and therefore no fruit. The simple solution is to cut back on the nitrogen and flowering should follow.

Another common mistake of some gardeners is to plant the garden in too much shade. Since most producing vegetable plants do best in full, day-long sun, anything less

will often result in less fruits and vegetables. Remember that a plant in the sun will probably need more water than one grown in the shade. This does not mean to water more often, but to water more deeply when you do irrigate. This will help prevent a water stress to the plant, another common reason for a poor tomato crop.

If you are interested in growing different specialty tomatoes, such as currant tomato or green grape cherry tomatoes, call or send an email request for information to the University of California Cooperative Extension office in Mariposa County at (209) 966-2417 or email to cemariposa@ucdavis.edu.

The University of California prohibits discrimination against or harassment of any person on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, physical or mental disability, medical condition (cancer-related or genetic characteristics), ancestry, marital status, age, sexual orientation, citizenship, or status as a covered veteran (covered veterans are special disabled veteran, recently separated veterans, Vietnam-era veterans or any other veterans who served on active duty during a war or in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge has been authorized) in any of its programs or activities or with respect to any of its employment policies, practices, or procedures. University Policy is intended to be consistent with the provisions of applicable State and Federal laws. Inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to the Affirmative Action/Staff Personnel Services Director, University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, 300 Lakeside Drive, 6th Floor, Oakland, CA 94612-3550, (510) 987-0096.