Mulch and Fertilize Tomato Plants

The race is on in many neighborhoods to see who can produce the first ripe tomato. There are a few things that a gardener can do to enhance tomato production.

No practice improves tomato plant growth more than mulching. Tomatoes prefer an even, consistent supply of soil moisture, and mulches prevent water from evaporating from the soil reserving more for use by the plant. Mulches also keep the area around the plant clear of weeds that can compete with plants and prevents soil from becoming hard and compacted. Compacted soil will take up water more slowly and provide less oxygen to plant root systems. Ideal mulches include dried grass clippings, straw or hay (free of weed seeds), bark or compost.

Tomatoes are a warm-season crop with a fibrous, fairly dense root system that will pick up fertilizer from a zone 12 to 13 inches deep and 3 to 4 feet wide around the plant. A slight amount of starter fertilizer (i.e. root stimulator or similar material diluted with water and applied when the plant is set out) provides mild fertilization early in the season when soils are cool and plant roots do not take up fertilizer efficiently. Gardeners seem to be more likely to over fertilize rather than under fertilize tomatoes. Tomatoes may need a side dressing when they are actively growing and about 10 to 12 inches tall. Fertilizing after that is seldom necessary except in a very wet season when nitrogen may leach downward through the soil.

Most gardeners want to make sure their tomatoes do well but should resist the tendency to fertilize too much. Excessive fertilization can result in large, rank vines with limited fruit set. It may contribute to spider mite problems and encourage blossom-end rot, a brown, leathery patch at the bottom of early fruit. Poor flavor and color are often linked to excessive fertilization.

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