There is one thing I think most of us can agree on. ‘There ain't nothing better than homegrown tomatoes!’,” a quote I attribute to Texas singer/songwriter Guy Clark. But for some of us, successfully growing tomatoes is difficult.

One secret old timers will agree on is to plant tomatoes early. Late February is a good time to get tomatoes in the ground but you have to be willing to go the extra mile and protect them from frost and freezes. Although our estimated last frost date is March 15, I can remember some really cold Easter mornings into April.

I had a very successful crop last year by planting in seven-gallon containers on my deck. I brought them in on cold nights. You can protect in-ground plants by building mini greenhouses over the plants or turning buckets over on top of them.

Tomatoes can be planted from early spring to early summer. But they are apt to develop more disease and pest problems as the season progresses. They will need continual monitoring to catch these problems early.

Soil for tomatoes should be enriched with lots of compost and organic matter. Since most north Florida soils tend to be on the acidic side, it is a good idea to check your soil pH to see if the addition of dolomite lime would be helpful. You can get a soil test done through the county extension office which will tell you what the pH is and if other nutrients are needed.

Worm castings added to the soil make for a vigorous plant and also reportedly helps with fungal problems. Plant your tomatoes deep as they develop roots all along the stem and this will give
you a sturdy plant with a strong root system. Take off bottom leaves about ½ way up or dig a trench and lay the plant on its side and pile soil over. Mulch your plants to help keep adequate and even moisture. The quality of fruit suffers if moisture supply is not consistent. Avoid overhead watering as it will create leaf spots and fungus’. Water early and only water the root zone.

Tomatoes are heavy feeders. Top-dress with compost or low doses of organic fertilizer every few weeks. Stake the plants with tomato cages, wire fencing, bamboo poles or trellises. Most varieties are aggressive growers and need support. Just make sure whatever you use that you can get your hand through to pick the fruit!

What varieties to plant? Most local growers agree the small cherry tomatoes are the easiest and tastiest. Farmer Herman of Turkey Hill Farm says his favorite is “the vine ripened one I have in my hand at the moment!” Some of the cherry types mentioned as ‘favorites’ of B O’Toole, organic grower from Madison, are Sweet 100’s, Red Fig, Fraleigh Grape and Tommy Toes. Donna Legare of Native Nurseries favors Yellow Pear. These smaller types keep on producing into late summer when you’ve just about had enough. Larger varieties that have been proven winners here include Cherokee Purple, Stupice (an heirloom from Czechoslovakia), Juliette, and Roma, both plum types. Arkansas Traveler is a tasty pink tomato and another unusual favorite is the tiny sweet Red Currant.

Growing your own vegetables can be one of the most rewarding, pleasurable experiences, and especially if you have enough to share!

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