

Tomato Strategy is Good Strategy

It's April, it's cold, it's wet and rainy. I just got back from a business trip to Florida where, while there, I wore shades, short sleeves and sundresses—also, flip-flops. Upon my return, I attempted an evening walk and before hitting one block was practically screaming with chills, despite wearing layers.

So this morning I bundled up to run a few errands, and while sprinting from my car into the grocery store, I skidded to a halt. Lined up outside were rows and rows of vegetable starts. At this point, the wintry wind was causing my nose to run, and I walked in place while standing in front of the vegetables. They looked so cold. I was so cold. But then I saw *them* and my heart sank with sadness. On the top row? All tomato starts. Obviously freshly pulled from their cozy greenhouse, they tried to stand strong, but their little leaves were already hanging low. I wanted to fit each of these poor little tomatoes with tiny fleece jackets, zip them up and possibly throw in some ear muffs. It was a sad sight.

I am here to tell you, Western Oregon gardeners, it is too early to plant your tomatoes. *Too early!* Do not be lured in by big box displays of warm weather veggie starts like tomatoes, eggplants or cucumbers. And for god's sake, put down the basil.

Still, it's not too soon to develop your strate-



the sassy gardener

BY LEANN LOCHER

gy for tomatoes this summer—I'll share mine with you.

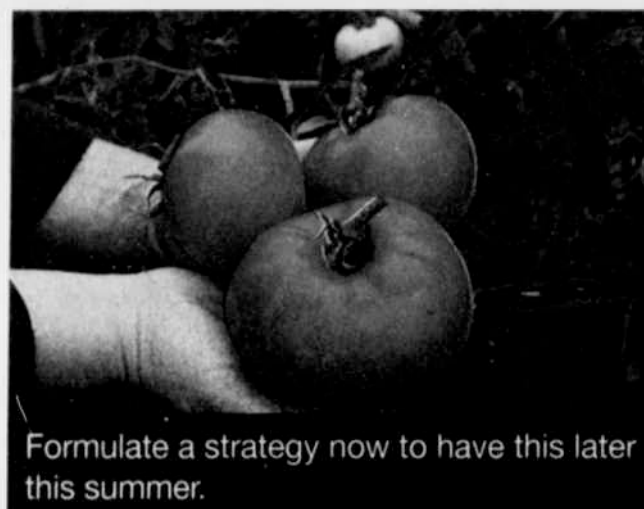
Rotate where you're growing them. If you've suffered tomato diseases in the past year (blight, anyone?), you'd best rotate where you're growing your tomatoes to another bed. It's good practice every few years to rotate plants through so the soil can build up and come into better balance.

The secret is in the soil. Good plants reflect good soil. Every year I add inches of rich compost, and when planting tomatoes, I'll amend the soil with a handful of lime. (You can get it in bulk at Garden Fever, 3433 NE 24th Ave.)

Use the beds now for cool weather plants. Don't stare out at your barren beds and wait for July. Use those beds for spring salad makings like lettuce and arugula, and most definitely peas. Harvest heavily and then plant your tomatoes once summer is actually here.

Wait to plant. Every year I get excited and I plant too early. Meanwhile, my plants shiver for a few months and don't grow an inch. I'm waiting until June to plant my tomatoes this year. Well, perhaps late May, but I'm going to protect them carefully.

Protect your starts. If you're going to plant



Formulate a strategy now to have this later this summer.

tomatoes prior to July, your little ones will do better with some protection from cool weather. I find walls of water to be clunky, but I've found wrapping the tomato cages with plastic wrap, and up and over the top, makes for great insulation as the plants take root. On hot days you can lift back the top plastic and then finally remove the side plastic when our nights become warm in the summer.

Know how you're going to support their growth and install it when you plant your tomatoes. It's pretty disappointing to accidentally spear a successfully growing plant while trying to stake it with a tomato cage. Don't risk it. Be

prepared to plant your tomatoes and your tomato supports (cages or side supports with twine) at the same time.

Put in your watering system when you plant. Tomatoes benefit from regular water once our hot summers really get going. You can prevent cracks in your tomatoes with regular watering and help conserve resources by using either soaker hoses or drip irrigation. It simplifies everything and frees you up from having to stand guard with the hose every night.

Choose proper varieties for where we live. Russian varieties from our cool weather friends are usually good, reliable producers. I can't help but to include Black Krim, Green Zebra and Taxi in my list for this year to help bring beautiful color to a plate filled with homegrown tomatoes. Tomatoes with shorter growth periods are better for our (sometimes) short summers.

Have a back-up plan: cherry tomatoes to the rescue. Speaking of short summers, I know the season never came last year. It was a sad one for tomatoes. But the huge success in my garden, despite the cool weather, was cherry tomatoes. They don't require as much heat to put out the goods. Don't let your summer go tomato-less: Plant cherry tomatoes. I recommend Sweet Million and Chocolate Cherry Tomatoes. 

LEANN LOCHER is an OSU Extension Master Gardener and gardens with her partner at their North Portland home. View photos of her garden and read sporadic ramblings at lelono.com.

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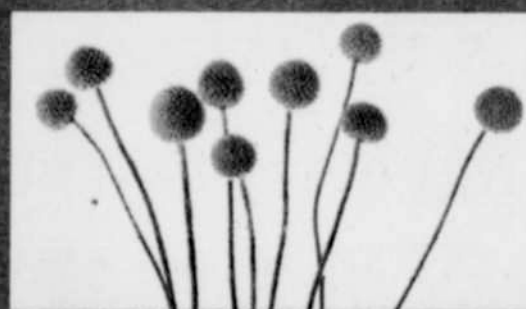

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