

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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This year at the annual Skagit County Master Gardener Foundation Plant Faire there will be many new and interesting varieties of tomatoes along with perennials, vegetable starts, herbs and annuals. Here is some information about tomatoes and their growing habit, size, taste and other aspects that will help you determine which varieties you may want to grow.

You should familiarize yourself with whether a tomato is determinate or indeterminate, because that tells you a great deal about its growth habits, size, the amount of space it requires and how it should be grown.

The determinate types of tomatoes are smaller and bushier plants that stay rather compact, growing from 2-4 feet in height, depending on the variety and growing conditions. Determinate types typically tend to grow and ripen their fruit in a fairly short season. Because they do not grow very tall, they require very little pruning or sucker removal. Some varieties need a wire cage or stakes to keep the vines and fruit off the ground.

The indeterminate types of tomatoes do not stop their vegetative growth and production of fruit until killed by frost in the fall. The terminal shoot and all its lateral shoots will continue to grow, so that by the end of the season, if not pruned and controlled, an individual plant of some varieties could grow as much as 10 to 12 feet in length.

With this distinction in mind, let me give you a brief summary of the major characteristics of some of the new varieties we are growing this year, as well of some of the good old stand-bys. All of the tomato varieties we grow do well west of the Cascades.

Heirloom Varieties include: Koralik, an heirloom variety from Russia, determinate, early maturity and huge production, great flavor, red color; Purple Calabash, an heirloom Cinderella pumpkin shape with light to dark purple/green skin, indeterminate with complex taste like a "fruity cabernet wine", about 3 inches by 1-and-one-half inches; Black Prince, an indeterminate from Siberia, deep garnet color, medium size, full of flavor; German Queen, an indeterminate, meaty slicer with sweet, rich flavor, rare variety.

Other tomato varieties available are those we have found that are favored by Skagit County home gardeners and they include: cherry types; Sun Gold, Sweet 100, Sweet Million and Green Grape. Early Girl, Early Cascade, Oregon Spring, Green Zebra and 25 other varieties of determinate and indeterminate nature. This year we have over 800 pepper plants of six varieties and almost every herb known including 10 different types of basil.

Perennials available include: Asclepias, Baby's breath, Columbine, Coreopsis, Dater, Delphinium, Dianthus, Evening primrose, Foxglove, Gaillardia, Hollyhocks, Hostas, Lavender, Lupine, Oriental poppy, Rudbeckia and Red hot poker.

Annuals include: Amaranthus, Aster, Bells of Ireland, Celosia, Cosmos, Four-o'clocks, Lavatera, Marigold, Portulaca and Zinnias.

Master Gardeners begin growing plants from seed the first week in February and continue planting and transplanting until mid-April. Perennials are dug and divided from the WSU Discovery Garden and Master Gardener's homes throughout the winter and spring. We enjoy bringing quality plants and many educational opportunities to our friends and neighbors of Skagit County through our Plant Faire each May.

A WSU/Skagit County Master Gardener Plant Diagnostic Clinic will be available from 8AM – 3PM to answer home gardening questions. Skagit County Master Composters, Skagitonians To Preserve Farmland and The Native Plant Society will be on hand for questions and educational information.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.