



## *How to Dry Farm Tomatoes in Contra Costa*

UC Master Gardener Program of Contra Costa County—Guide to Growing Tomatoes

1. **PREPARING THE BED:** As early as possible in the spring, prepare a bed in our native clay soil when the soil moisture content allows a handful of soil to crumble easily.
  - a. You may need to wait for the soil to dry out, or you may need to water if it's too dry.
  - b. Double dig the entire bed to a depth of 18 – 24 inches. Once a bed is dug, you should avoid walking on it.
  - c. Add 1 – 2 inches of finished compost and mix it into the top 3 – 6 inches of the double-dug bed, taking care not to step directly on the fluffed-up, aerated soil.
  - d. Water the bed well, add a layer of straw or leaf mulch and wait for planting day.
2. **CARING FOR YOUR PLANTS:** Until planting time, keep your tomato plants inside in a warm, sunny location, and allow them to get tall and a little leggy. Continue to care for them with fertilizer that encourages root growth, and perhaps repot into gallon pots in order to have more room for strong root growth.
3. **SETTING OUT YOUR PLANTS:** Mid-May is warm enough for planting.
  - a. Dig holes deep enough to bury both the roots and all but the top 4 – 5 inches of each plant's main stem, setting aside the removed soil. Space holes 4 – 5 feet apart.
  - b. Pinch or cut off all the leaves and branches below the top 4 or 5 inches of the plant. Pinch off any flowers or flower buds to let the plant's energy go towards forming a strong root system.
  - c. Water each planting hole well and let it drain.
  - d. Mix a little compost and a bit of organic tomato fertilizer into the soil you removed from the planting holes, and then plant each tomato, using this mixture to fill in the hole. When planting, bury the bare stem and leave only the top 4 or 5 inches of leaves and branches exposed.
  - e. Water deeply, and then mulch around the plants with 3 – 4 inches of leaf mulch, straw or other organic material.
4. **WATERING YOUR PLANTS:** Water deeply again a few days later, then once a week for three weeks. After that, particularly when you see fruit begin to develop, stop watering altogether. Do not be tempted to water your tomatoes, because irregular watering can result in blossom end rot. If you have prepared the bed and mulched well, the tomatoes should be able to find their own water by sending their roots deeply into the fluffed up, 18 – 24 inch deep, double dug bed.
5. **PREPARING FOR NEXT YEAR:** Ideally, a cover crop of legumes should be planted in the tomato bed in the fall, and turned under in the spring as the legumes start to flower and the soil moisture content is at that crumbly stage. This adds nitrogen and organic material to the soil, which helps with the dry farming process. Add this step of planting a legume cover crop to your November “what to do in the garden” list. Tomatoes should not be planted in the same space two years in a row, so each fall you will be preparing a new bed for next year's crop.