❧ In Sonoma County, plant tomatoes between April 15 and Jun 15. If you grow tomatoes from seed, start eight weeks before planting out in the garden.

❧ If you protect the plants from frost, you can set them out in the garden as early as mid-March.. Possible ways to provide protection: Cover each plant with a cloche made by removing the bottom of a translucent plastic gallon jug, or use a purchased cloche. Or try "Wall O'Water" , a commercial product that absorbs solar heat during the day and releases heat at night.

❧ Tomato seedlings generally become available at nurseries and Farmers' Markets before the best date for planting. To get the best selection, buy your seedlings as soon as you see the varieties you want. Keep them in pots, in full sun, until the danger of frost is over. Take them inside when there is danger of frost. Make sure that the plants are not root-bound. If you can see roots at the pot's drainage hole, put the plant in a larger container. You may need to do this more than once.

❧ Some of the worst tomato problems are Verticillium wilt, Fusarium wilt, and nematodes.   Seedling labels and seed packets indicate resistance to these diseases by the letters "VFN". (If this information is not provided, the book *California Vegetable Patch and Seed Source*, by Duane and Karen Newcomb, is a good source of this information.)

❧ In many parts of Sonoma County, particularly the West County areas, summers are too cool for long-season tomatoes. Choose early maturing varieties to be sure to have ripe tomatoes before fall. Some favorite early varieties are Early Girl, Dona, and Stupice.

❧ Tomato varieties are divided into two groups: determinate, which grow to a certain size and stop, and indeterminate, which continue to grow until they are killed by the first frost. The determinate varieties are handy for farmers who want to harvest all of the crop at once, but indeterminate varieties are best for home gardeners who want to harvest all season.

❧ Buy young plants with healthy green leaves and white roots.

❧ Give tomatoes a location in the garden that gets full sun (at least ten hours per day).

❧ To minimize problems from soil-borne diseases, do not plant tomatoes where tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, potatoes, or strawberries have been grown during the past three years. (If your tomatoes did not suffer from wilts or blights in previous years and you must choose between such plant rotation and putting the tomatoes in full sun, give them full sun.)

❧ Before planting, work compost or a balanced fertilizer into the planting bed.

❧ Allow 18" to 24" between tomatoes when planting, depending on the method you choose to support them (see below).

❧ When planting the seedlings in the garden (and when moving them to larger pots), plant so that the first set of leaves is just above the new soil level. If the plant has been allowed to get so tall in its pot that you would have to plant it more than 5" or 6" deep, plant it on its side at about that level and gently bend the stem up so that the first set of leaves is just above the soil level.

- Mulch with an organic material such as compost or straw to help keep weeds down and the moisture in.

- Keep the plants evenly moist but not soggy. Blossom-end rot, characterized by fruits that are brown-black on the bottom, is encouraged by uneven watering.

- Some gardeners like to stop watering tomatoes after the fruits form. The tomatoes will not grow as large as they would with water, but they may have more concentrated flavor.

- Prune your tomatoes for larger fruits and to keep them from taking over your garden. As soon as side shoots form at leaf axles, pinch them off with your fingers; if they have grown to large to pinch off easily, clip them off with scissors or shears.

- Indeterminate varieties require support. Some of the methods that can be used are:

  For each plant, use one or two sturdy stakes; have at least 5' above soil level and about 18" buried. Set up the stakes before planting. When the plant is 12" to 18" tall , tie it loosely to the stake with soft twine, stretchable plastic ties, or strips of soft rags. Be sure to keep the plant pruned as it grows. If using one stake, allow only the main stem to grow. If using two stakes, put one on either side of the plant; allow one side shoot to develop into a main stem and tie it to the second stake.

  Use a wire tomato cage that is at least 5' high. Buy cages or make your own. For each cage, bend a 6' length of 6" x 6" grid concrete reinforcing wire into a cylinder; bend the cut ends of wire to close the cylinder. Surround the plant with the cylinder. Either push the wires at the bottom of the cylinder into the ground or support the cylinder with two stakes driven into the ground on either side and tied to the cylinder. Control the plant by pushing shoots inside the cylinder.

  Place a row of sturdy stakes in the row of tomatoes, with two plants between each pair of stakes. Starting about 1 foot from the ground, form a fence-like series of loops around the stakes: Tie twine to the stake on one end of the row, stretch the twine to the next stake, loop it around the stake and stretch it to the next, keeping the twine the same distance from the ground for each stake. When you reach the other end of the row, wind once around the stake and return in the same manner, making the loops on the opposite side (forming a series of "figure eights"), and tying the twine to the end of the twine at the start. Repeat this 8" to 12" above the last series of loops until the top row of your "fence" is five to six feet above the ground. As the plants grow, keep them tucked between the twines that reach between the stakes.

- Pinch off the tops of stems when they begin to reach the top of the support.

- Watch for pests – they are more easily controlled before the populations get large. Control whitefly (small, white, flying insects that tend to gather on the undersides of leaves and fly off when disturbed) by putting out yellow sticky traps. Hand pick tomato hornworms (large caterpillars whose color is the same as tomato leaves) and destroy them.