

Growing Tomatoes in Therapeutic Gardening Settings

There is nothing quite like the burst of flavor that comes from a cherry tomato plucked directly from a home garden; so naturally tomatoes top the list of favorite vegetables to grow in a therapeutic gardening program. There are a few determinate tomato varieties that can be grown successfully in small containers just 8 to 10 inches deep, like 'Tiny Tim' cherry or 'Tumbler' salad size. You could even try 'Tumbler' in a hanging container. If you use a medium container, at least 12 inches in diameter and 18 inches deep, there are even more variety possibilities of determinate bush-type tomatoes that could be grown. If you are fortunate enough to have a raised bed with a sturdy trellis, such as the one pictured below (along with a late-August harvest) in the Therapy Garden at the Williamsburg Botanical Garden, you can even grow indeterminate vining-type tomato plants that will continue to bear fruit until frost. Determinate tomatoes usually grow to just 2 or 3 feet tall. They flower, fruit and mature fairly quickly, yielding just one main crop.



Shown at right are indeterminate tomatoes growing in JCC/W VCE-MG self-watering containers...with serious caging! The containers work well with determinate varieties without the need for such sturdy support.



At left is a determinate cherry tomato plant happily growing in a container just 10 inches in diameter. This size container is easy to carry inside if gardening sessions are usually conducted there rather than outside.

For most of our TG programs where just one or several tomato plants are grown, we start with seedlings rather than seeds. Often we're able to procure plants at our annual Master Gardener plant sale the end of April...and you could, too!

There are many activities centered around tomatoes that can be done over the next few months as the tomatoes grow. Here are some you might use, depending on your group:

- Plant, stake appropriately, establish a watering plan & find a sunny spot
- Check at each session for adequate water, suckers to remove, any sign of disease or insect damage...perhaps a lesson on horn worms is needed. (See it?!)
- Talk about the history of tomatoes...they weren't always popular.
- Talk about all the different sizes, colors, shapes with samples to show
- Do a simple discussion on the nutritional value of tomatoes
- When it's time to start harvesting, do a taste test...homegrown vs. store-bought or taste different varieties of homegrown tomatoes to see which is voted "best" by your group. Talk about companion planting, plant some basil with your tomato plant and enjoy the combination when you harvest! Share simple recipes.

Books you might find helpful: *Bountiful Container* by Rose Marie Nichols McGee & Maggie Stuckey; *Square Foot Gardening* by Mel Bartholomew



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