



Looking forward to summer means looking forward to garden-fresh home-grown tomatoes, and if you've exposed yourself to any seed catalogs this spring, you know you can almost taste the sweet-tart flavor of the fat glossy tomatoes pictured in the pages featuring vegetables.

Some of us have plenty of garden space and rich soil; we can let our tomato plants spread all over the lower forty. Others have only small gardens and can't find room for as many plants as we'd like.

If you're part of the latter group, the Oriental Tomato Ring is for you. Even if you've plenty of space, you might like to try this method just for a change of pace.

It's possible to produce two hundred pounds of tomatoes in a very small area if you're willing to do a little work and make a small investment.

Sometime in the next two or three weeks take a few minutes to consult with your favorite nurseryman about the best type of climbing tomato -- not a free-standing bush, a climber -- and put your order in for four or six plants.

At a lumberyard pick up a fourteen-foot-length of their most inexpensive fencing. Get the welded kind with two-by-four inch rectangular openings. While there, also buy fourteen feet of plastic screening -- the kind used for windows -- 24" wide.

You'll need two 50-pound bags of pulverized (not composted) cow manure, and a six-cubic-foot bag of peat moss. If the supermarket doesn't have them, your garden store does.

Choose the sunniest fairly dry part of your garden for your tomato ring. Measure a circle with a diameter of about seven feet, more or less. Mark its outer edge with stakes, stones or shells if you want.

Bend the fencing to form a circle approximately five feet in diameter -- a short tube. The slightly overlapping edges can be clipped together with paper clips or bits of wire. Or with a pliers, clamp the fence wire to hold the shape.

Line one end of the wire frame on the inside with the length of screening. This will hold the soil. Center the frame, upright, with the screened end at the base, in the seven-foot circle.

Now you're ready to prepare your soil.

In a wheelbarrow -- or at the edge of some paved area (the driveway or even the sidewalk or street will do nicely) prepare a mixture of one-third peat moss, one-third manure, and one-third your own backyard soil.

Mix thoroughly before shoveling into the frame. Hold back a couple of bucketsful each of manure and peatmoss to use later. The mix should come up about ten inches higher than the top of the screening inside the wire frame.

If some sifts through the larger holes above the screening, don't worry; dampening the mixture can help it hold its shape.

It's a good idea to add a heavy pine-needle mulch on top of this very rich soil inside the ring to discourage weeds.

Finally, in the space between the outside of the frame and the outer perimeter of the larger circle, work the remaining manure and peat moss, and any soil that has sifted out, into the ground at the base of the frame.

This area should be about a foot wide all around the frame. Dig it in well to a depth of at least eight inches; it's better to get it down ten or twelve inches.

After the last frost -- better wait until you've ripped the month of May off your calendar -- you can safely set out your tomato plants. You've been giving them a good start in a cool and sunny window or in a cold frame, I hope. Or you'll have picked up your order from the nurseryman.

Now I'll tell you one of the secrets of a successful Oriental tomato ring -- or growing any tomato for that matter. Starve them for best production. Tomatoes respond to stimulation and, if over-fed, remain in a vegetative growing period instead of becoming reproductive.

It's not a lot of foliage you want -- but lots of tomatoes.

So while you're waiting for the season's last frost and your tomato plants are sitting in their flats in the cold frame, give them no more than the smallest amount of fertilizer.

Wait until they start to set blossoms before you plant your ring.

Four plants set at equal distance around the outside of the frame is probably all you'll need unless you've a huge family and lots of

neighbors with voracious appetites for tomatoes. If you doubt me, go ahead and set out six plants.

Because birds love tomatoes almost as much as people do, the best way to protect your harvest is to pick them when the first flush comes into the skins, streaking them with pale white. Ripen these in paper bags or wrap them in newspaper.

They'll be dead-ripe in a week or so.

Or, if you insist on eating yours right off the vine, toss a mesh net over the frame -- one big enough to cover the plants.

You can be sure you'll have the same troubles growing tomatoes this way as any other. The plants will show holes and notches in the leaves. This means worms or caterpillars.

The only answer is to spray or dust with Sevin at the first sign. Chances for a full crop without spraying or dusting are slim.

You'll also be wise to keep a sharp eye out for wilt. Recognizable by its name, a perfect description, you've got wilt when the plants droop even when you know they don't need water. Your garden shop can recommend a dust.

Control the birds, bugs and wilt, and you'll find the plants producing so many tomatoes you'll wonder how so little space can possibly give you such a plentiful harvest.

The secret is inside your ring.

Best of all about creating your own tomato garden in less than 50 square feet of ground is the knowledge you're all set for years to come.

Use your ring over again, year after year. All you need to recharge the soil is more dried pulverized manure. Add it to the mixture inside the frame and stir it up thoroughly.

Good luck . . . bon appetit -- and brace yourself for plenty of tomatoes. Before fall's first frost you'll have had tomatoes in every salad, made juice, given away all you can, and will be picking green ones for pickling.