The Tomato – New Jersey's Jewel
Ten Top Tomato Tips

1. Know your soil pH and fertility requirements. A soil pH of 6.0-6.5 is optimum for good tomato growth. (Rutgers Cooperative Extension offers soil tests.) Plant transplants in well drained soil after all danger of frost, typically May 15 in Ocean County.

2. Think of how you want to use them, and select plum tomatoes for sauces, beefsteak types for sandwiches and cherry or grape types for salads.

3. Look for VFN and/or VFNT on the plant label: V (resistant to Verticillium wilt); F (resistant to Fusarium wilt); N (to Nematodes); T (to Tobacco Mosaic Virus.) Note if the variety is determinate, (fruits abundantly in one flush and then dies), or indeterminate, (flowers, fruits and grows continuously through the season).

4. Plant tomatoes 2'-3' by 4'-5’ apart to promote good air circulation and to reduce insect and disease problems. Set them so the soil level is just below the lowest leaves. Support your plants with stakes or cages as needed.

5. To reduce over-wintering insect and soil diseases, do not plant tomatoes in an area previously planted with tomatoes, peppers, eggplants or potatoes.

6. Allow for adequate sunlight; tomatoes need at least 8 hours of direct sun each day.

7. Fertilize tomato transplants with a soluble fertilizer to minimize transplant shock. Use a soluble fertilizer, liquid compost tea or a 5-10-5 solid fertilizer (1/2 cup per plant) to side-dress plants when fruits first form. Follow label directions for fertilizers.

8. Water roots regularly and deeply with soaker hoses (1” per week if no rain). Avoid wetting the leaves to control leaf diseases.

9. Do not allow root competition from other plants. Mulch to control loss of soil moisture after the soil warms, but cultivate only lightly during the growing season to avoid damaging shallow roots.

10. Inspect your plants often. Safeguard beneficial insects such as praying mantis and lady beetles, which help control insect pests. Handpick tomato hornworms and dispose. Plant companion plants like marigolds and basil to also help control pests.

For more information about growing tomatoes, refer to Rutgers Fact Sheet “Growing Tomatoes in the Home Garden” (FS678) at: http://ocean.rcre.rutgers.edu/homehort.

The bright green, yellow and white stripes of the monarch caterpillar warn would-be predators. When the caterpillar eats milkweed leaves, the toxins are absorbed into its body. Birds, lizards and mammals find them distasteful; spiders and wasps are immune and are able to eat them.

Checklist for May

- Use Mother’s Day as a rule of thumb for planting summer-blooming annuals and tender vegetables in outside beds and containers.
- Remove spent rhododendron and azalea blossoms and use fertilizer for acid-loving plants.
- Look for and control lacebugs with insecticidal soap or horticultural oil.
- Check for bagworms on evergreens. Remove and destroy those that have overwintered.
- Pinch out growing tips of chrysanthemums to induce branching.
- Use spot treatment to control broadleafed weeds.
- Avoid night watering and overfertilization of lawns with nitrogen to prevent diseases.
- Before putting houseplants outdoors for the summer (after last frost date), acclimate to the new environment.