An old saying goes “there are two things money can’t buy- love and homegrown tomatoes.” The climax of the summer garden is the gushing forth of the tomato crop. If you garden eight acres, like we do, or just eight square feet, it’s likely you are growing this favorite vegetable.

Around April 1st the seeds are sown in a cold frame, or a tray on the window sill. Six weeks later they are ready to set. Holes are dug four feet apart and a quart of water is poured in them. The roots are set in the mud and covered with dry soil. If the vine is long I lean them over, cover with earth, and only leave the top few leaves above ground.

Tomatoes love a loose, well-rained soil with plenty of organic matter. We use biodynamic compost to enrich the gardens and build a live soil humus full of beneficial microbes, who keep the plants healthy. Too much nitrogen will give you all vine and no fruit, but that’s not a problem if you don’t use artificial fertilizer.

Another way to add organic matter is mulching, and tomatoes love it. Old hay laid down thickly keeps the moisture in and the weeds out. It also keeps the fruit off the soil.

A tomato touching the ground is a rotten one, so we stake them up. A row if tobacco sticks and twine on each side props them up. Indeterminate varieties continue to grow and bear fruit all summer long and definitely require staking. Determinate varieties bear all at once and then fade out but we stake then anyway. You’ll get more and better fruit by keeping them up from touching the soil.

Diseases are a problem, but the wide spacing allows for air flow between the vines, and this helps. A black spot on the blossom end indicates a lack of calcium. Lime is the remedy, either ground limestone or crushed eggs hells will work. A fermented tea made from horsetail (equisitun arsense) helps prevent diseases because of it’s high silica content. The beautiful sphinx moth has a giant catapillar called the tomato horn worm. Ours always get killed by a wasp who lays her eggs on the back of the worm; so it’s not an issue in organic gardens. Stick bugs mar the fruit, which is one reason to harvest early.

The term vine-ripe tomato is a marketing ploy. The stores I used to sell at when Nashville had locally owned health food stores, refused vine-ripe tomatoes. They insisted the tomatoes were picked green with a slight blush, so they could ripen up inside, away from bugs and diseases. Tomatoes ripen perfectly well off the vine, but we like to harvest them about a day or two before dead ripe.

Hybrids, like Early Girl and Park’s Whopper, offer disease resistance and large yields. When grown organically they taste superb. We grow lots of heirloom varieties, too, like the dark Black Trifele from Russia, the Golden Jubilee and the pink Mortgage Lifter. This last one used to be called Radiator Charlie until the farmer paid off his mortgage with it’s huge crops.

Tomatoes and sweet basil not only go good together on a plate, they are companion plants in the garden. We can a lot and like to use paste tomatoes, like San Marzano for sauce. The homegardner grows the best thing money can’t buy, or atleast the second best.