Caring for tomatoes
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In my short time here in North Carolina, one thing I have come to realize is that no fruit or vegetable is more beloved around here than the tomato. Some gardeners grow them for size, and some grow them for sweetness. They grow in gardens throughout the county and can thrive in traditional row gardens, raised beds, and containers. But tomatoes have more than their fair share of pest problems. Proper care of tomato plants will help to prevent disease and insect issues.

By now, you should have your tomato plants in the garden. Tomatoes should not be planted where they were grown last year. Rotating vegetable crops will help to prevent the build-up of pathogens in the soil.

Adding compost or old leaves to our clay soil will improve the soil. This organic material should be worked into the top 6 to 9 inches. Lime and fertilizer should be applied according to soil test results. Soil test kits are available at the Iredell Extension office.

Tomatoes are very sensitive to over-fertilization. Tomatoes should be fertilized after plants have started to set fruit and 4 to 6 weeks thereafter during the season. Plants should be side-dressed with 2 to 3 tablespoons per plant of a complete fertilizer such as 8-8-8 or 10-10-10. The fertilizer should be applied 4 to 6 inches from the plant stem to avoid fertilizer burn.

Tomatoes require consistent water. The soil around the plants should be soaked 6 to 8 inches deep each week when there is no rain. Mulching will help to
maintain even soil moisture and prevent weeds. To mulch, lay a 2 to 3 inch layer of straw or composted leaves around the plants. Allowing the soil moisture to fluctuate greatly will result in blossom end rot, a disorder characterized by black leathery spots on the blossom end of the tomato.

Frequent observation of your plants will help you to catch insect and disease problems early, before they get out of hand. Contact the Iredell County Cooperative Extension Service at 704-873-0507 if you're in need of pesticide recommendations.

If all of this seems like too much work, you can head to any of our local farmers markets and buy fresh tomatoes for your ‘mater sandwich.