



** This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at <https://ksre-learn.com/how-to-build-tomato-cages>

Released: May 16, 2024

Tomato Talk: Stake plants to keep fruit off ground, reduce risk of disease

K-State horticulture expert outlines options for giving tomatoes a lift

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Late May and early June are an important period for one of home gardener’s favorite crops – tomatoes.

Kansas State University horticultural expert Cynthia Domenghini said tomatoes need support to remain upright. If left to grow on the ground, she notes, tomatoes receive less airflow and are at greater risk for disease.

“Support structures keep the fruit off the ground, which helps reduce contamination from contact with soil,” Domenghini said.

Is there a right or wrong way to support tomatoes? “Maybe...” Domenghini said.

For small, container tomatoes, traditional cages purchased at local stores can be effective. The cages often come in fun colors, but tend to be more expensive than building your own. “The support they provide is minimal and often insufficient for most tomato varieties,” Domenghini said.

She suggests home gardeners build their own cages using concrete reinforcing mesh.

“With a roll 150 feet long and five feet tall, you can create multiple tomato cages and trellises to support climbing plants,” she said. “The openings between the wires are large enough to fit your hand through for harvesting and allow even large slicing tomatoes to slide through.”

To make your own tomato cage, cut the wire to the desired length and create a cylinder that will wrap around the plant. As an example, Domenghini notes that cutting wire to a length of six feet will make a cage that is almost two feet in diameter.

Wrap the cut wires around the other end of the panel to make a cylindrical shape. “To keep the cage in place, you will need at least one or two wooden stakes,” she said. “Hammer them into the soil several inches and attach the cage to them using wire or garden tape.”

Another support method is a trellising system known as ‘basketweave’ or ‘stake and weave.’ With plants in a row, place a t-post in the ground between every few plants, and a t-post at the beginning and end of each row.

“When plants are about one foot tall, tie a strand of twine to the t-post at one end of the row,” Domenghini said. “Walk the length of the row holding the twine and wrapping it around each t-post as you pass.”

At the end of the row, she adds, wrap the twine around the t-post and return to the start while again wrapping the twine around each post.

“As you come upon plants, they should be carefully placed between the strings for support,” Domenghini said. “When you reach the starting point, cut the twine and secure it to the t-post. As the plants grow, add twine higher up on the posts in the same pattern. Twine should be added every 8-12 inches, or at least before the plants begin to droop.”

Domenghini and her colleagues in K-State's Department of Horticulture and Natural Resources produce a weekly [Horticulture Newsletter](#) with tips for maintaining home landscapes and gardens. The newsletter is available to [view online](#) or can be delivered by email each week.

Interested persons can also send their garden and yard-related questions to Domenghini at cdom@ksu.edu, or contact your [local K-State Research and Extension office](#).

###

Sidebar

Question of the Week

Does it matter when I put mulch around my tomato plants?

Great question! We know mulch is a temperature regulator. Typically, we think of it as a good thing, as it keeps the soil from getting too hot during the summer.

However, that also means that if applied early in the spring, it is going to slow down the soil from warming up when our warm season veggies really need it to. It may also retain too much moisture due to slower evaporation rates.

So, it is best to wait until the soil has warmed up, usually late-May to early-June, before adding mulch around tomato plants.

-- Cynthia Domenghini, Kansas State University horticultural expert, cdom@ksu.edu

-30-

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story

K-State Horticulture Newsletter, <https://hnr.k-state.edu/extension/info-center/newsletters/index.html>

K-State Research and Extension local offices, <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html>

K-State Research and Extension is a short name for the Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, a program designed to generate and distribute useful knowledge for the wellbeing of Kansans. Supported by county, state, federal and private funds, the program has county extension offices, experiment fields, area extension offices and regional research centers statewide. Its headquarters is on the K-State campus in Manhattan. For more information, visit www.ksre.ksu.edu. K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

For more information:

Cynthia Domenghini

Cdom@ksu.edu