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QUESTION BOX

Stake tomato plants or let them sprawl?
When use summer mulches?
Stone over seed?
Fertilize in early summer?

INFORMATION FROM

Plant scientists of the
U. S. Department of
Agriculture

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The first question today is about tomatoes in the home garden. A gardener asks: "Does it really pay to go to all the trouble of prining tomatoes and putting in stakes and tying them up as the garden bulletins advise? I often notice that farmers who raise acres of tomatoes let the plants lie on the ground."

Plant scientists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture say that pruning and staking tomatoes in the small home garden has many advantages. For one thing, it saves space in the garden. When plants are tied up, you can set them as close as two feet apart in all directions. Then, plants tied to stakes are easier to cultivate. The tomatoes are cleaner because they are off the ground. Tomatoes ripen a little earlier if they are tied up. And finally, tomatoes up on stakes get more sun and are richer in vitamin C, according to the recent report of a study by the Utah Agricultural Experiment Station.

There you have 5 good reasons why it pays to prune and stake tomato plants in the home garden.

Plant scientists say any stakes about an inch and a half in diameter and 4 or 5 feet long will answer. Prune tomato plants by pinching out the side shoots as they appear where the leaf joins the main stem. The fruit clusters appear on the opposite side of the stem where there is no leaf, and, of course, you do not prune these. Tie the plants to the stakes with soft twine or small strips of old cotton goods. Never use wire or fine string that might cut the stems. Tie loosely below a

leaf so that the stem will have support but won't be bound or injured.

The question that comes up second is about summer mulches for the garden. A young gardener writes: "I just don't understand when, where or how to use what the book calls 'summer mulches' for the garden."

Summer mulches are coverings for the soil between the rows of vegetables. They help keep the soil moist and cool and also keep down weeds. They may be of straw, such as you use in the strawberry bed, or paper, or dried clippings of grass from the lawn, or even dried moss. You don't put on summer mulches until the soil is moderately warm. If you use them too early in spring, they will keep the soil too cool and the plants will grow slowly. But as the summer weather gets warm and dry, mulches help by keeping the soil cool and moist.

Another gardener writes: "Last summer my tomato plants grew too tall and lanky and produced poor foliage and very little fruit. I'd like to do better this year. Can you tell me whether the soil was to blame for the poor growth or what?"

Tomatoes must have full sun most of the day if they are to make normal growth. They require rich soil but are very sensitive to too much nitrogen in the soil, from manure or nitrate of soda or other commercial fertilizer. If you use manure for tomatoes, use superphosphate along with it at the rate of about 2 handfuls worked in around each plant. If you use only commercial fertilizer work about a tablespoonful around each plant, using fertilizer the stores sell as "4-10-4".

Now from questions let's turn to a couple of suggestions from home gardeners interested in helping other gardeners profit by their experience. Here's a tip from a housewife gardener who lives in a part of the country where it is dry and windy. She writes: "We gardeners who have to fight dry windy weather learn a few tricks as we go along. Here are a few I've learned. If you aim to plant tomato and cabbage seed in the garden to save work, dig a hole in moist dirt, drop seed in, cover lightly, then put a stone on it. The stone holds the soil from blowing and keeps

in a little moisture until the seed gets started. The seed should be up by about the third day. Then lay the rock north of the plant to reflect heat and put a little dirt near the plant. This helps with watermelon, muskmelon, squash and potatoes, too. I have also found that corn makes a good shelter for the garden and does not take the moisture from the soil as some other plants do."

Last question. "Does it help to add fertilizer to the garden during the growing season? I notice my neighbor puts some between the rows along in June or July."

If the ground is well prepared and well fertilized before planting, it is not always necessary to add fertilizer between the rows during the growing season. But if the soil is very light, or has had too much rain, it often pays to put part of the fertilizer needed after the crop is well started.

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