The time is rapidly approaching for Texas vegetable gardeners to get their garden plot ready for the growing season. Let’s assume for the moment that your soil has been properly covered over the winter with a nourishing layer of compost. It would be good to now gently rake the compost into the beds. Be careful not to disturb the soil deeper than 3 to 5 inches. This will help to promote and preserve the microbial ecosystem that is so important to your plant health and vigor.

Plant selection is now on the top of every serious gardener’s agenda. That brings me to the topic for this article, Tomatoes. Tomatoes are by far the most popular and prevalent vegetable planted in central Texas gardens. The tomato, Lycopersicon esculentum, is thought to have originated in the Andes mountains area of South America. As native civilizations migrated north, they brought their tomato plants with them. Eventually, the European explorers took the tomato back to Europe. The plants were later re-introduced to North America by European settlers.

If you have ever eaten a fresh garden ripened tomato, you will understand why they are preferred over the ones purchased at the grocery store. Some of the most popular large varieties found locally are Celebrity, Bush Celebrity, Better Boy, Amelia, 444 Hybrid, and First Lady. Some popular small (cherry) varieties are Jolly, Juliette, Sweet 100 Hybrid, Chelsea, and Enchantment. Roma tomatoes are often the choice for those want to make tomato paste or salsa.

You can start your tomatoes either by seed or by direct planting. However, it is not recommended to direct plant the seeds in the garden. For you seed starters, now is the time to set your seeds. You should have the seeds selected and in the starter beds by the end of the first week of March. Keep your seed beds damp and warm. It is suggested that you use a grow light twelve hours out of every twenty-four hours to warm the starter soil and acclimate the sets to the natural light conditions. For those of you not wanting to start from seeds, you can wait until after the danger of frost has passed and purchase sets from local suppliers. Also, the Master Gardeners will have tomato plants at their sale on March 26th.

Lastly, the Bell County Master Gardeners are planning to conduct a vegetable gardening class on March 21st at 6:00 PM at the Bell County Extension office on Main Street in Belton. All are welcome to hear the tried and true methods for tomatoes in Central Texas!
Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask bcmga@gmail.com