

GROWING TOMATOES – THE UPSIDE-DOWN WAY

Diane Threlkeld

I always admire gardeners in the Pacific Northwest who grow tomatoes (and succeed) in our cool, unpredictable climate. Other than using a greenhouse, there just never seemed to be a way to improve the odds of success enough for me to give it a try. Then came those amazing ads for the upside-down tomato planters, Topsy Turvy being one of the most common. Could it be? A simple answer to the many dilemmas (short growing season, ground temperature, soil-borne diseases, etc.) right in front of us? Maybe, but not as simple as we might like.

Check out “Don’t flip over Topsy Turvy” an article in the June 2011 *Consumer Reports* which shares results of their test. Some nurseries, including Henery’s Garden Center in Port Townsend, carries the Topsy Turvy

So, in summary, here are the main pros and cons of using a hanging, upside-down planter for growing tomatoes:

Pros

- It’s a space saver. If ground gardening space is a problem for you, then this type of planter may be the answer.
- Roots stay warmer. With an inverted planter, sun hits the roots and soil first. So no more waiting for that magical 55 degree soil temperature.
- Plant is above ground. Soil-borne diseases all but disappear. Same with pests like cut worms, squirrels, rabbits, etc.
- No weeding. Enough said.

Cons

- Small tomatoes, like cherry and grape, maybe roma, work best. Those beautiful beefsteak varieties may be too heavy for an inverted planting system.
- Planting in these planters can be tricky. Small seedlings, about 6” tall, work best as you try to thread roots and foliage through the small openings in the planter bag. Once you add soil, the planters become pretty heavy.
- Speaking of heavy, hanging the planters can be awkward. Don’t water the plant until it’s hung. Holding up a 60 lb planter to hang above you is difficult. Hooks to hold the planters need to be in heavy wood, like a 2x4 stud.
- Soil dries out faster so watering needs increase. Height is an issue; you’ll want the planter low enough to access the opening in the top lid for watering or have a step-stool nearby.