

Christmas Tomatoes

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This year our garden's tomatoes produced lots of tomatoes, but very late in the season (late September and October). There are still many green tomatoes on our plants. My wife and I came up with a way to protect the plants from the October frosts (we're in the northwest US at about 45° latitude).

My wife uses concrete reinforcing wire cages around the tomatoes, so we wrap these with old blankets and hold them in place with clothespins. Then we run strings of Christmas lights to each plant to provide a bit of heat during the night. These incandescent lamp strings consume from 120 to 150 W of power and let us heat about three plants with one string.

Here's a picture of the tomatoes covered in early October:



Here's what they look like at night:



We've trimmed back to the three most important plants as of today (26 Oct). Here's how a string of lights is put on one plant:



This morning, I used my little IR thermometer to measure the fence temperature at 34 °F. Inside the tomato plant coverings, it was a toasty 65-72 °F, so the plants are well-protected from the frost.

While the use of a light bulb to provide heat isn't new, I liked the idea of using something we already had around the house. Of course, make sure the lights are powered from a GFI outlet to protect a bit better from shocks if things get wet.

Update: we continued getting tomatoes from our plants after Thanksgiving. We finally gave up because we had gotten most of the edible tomatoes from the plants. The only other twist is that it helps to continue to water the plants occasionally, as we rarely have rain during October.