

Growing Tomatoes

CHOOSING PLANTS There is a wonderful array of tomato varieties available as plants. You can grow huge tomatoes worth bragging about, paste tomatoes such as romas, for sauces, cherry & pear tomatoes & even yellow & orange ones!

Whichever varieties you choose, keep in mind that some tomatoes have been bred to resist certain viruses & fungal diseases. Many varieties bear some or all of these initials on their labels or seed packs; V F N T. They indicate that the variety is tolerant to V-Verticillium Wilt, F- Fusarium Wilt, N- Nematodes, & T- Tobacco Mosaic Virus.

PLANTING Tomatoes require full sun, at least 6 to 8 hours of hot sun per day for best production & growth. Select a sunny location where water does not stand in puddles after a heavy rain. Bring down the acidity of your soil by adding dolomite lime in the spring. This will help prevent end rot. Also be certain that tomatoes or their relatives (Potatoes, Peppers, Eggplants, Petunias, Nicotiana) have not grown there for at least 1 year. This is called "rotation planting" & is important in the control of diseases such as early & late blight.

SPACING When planting, space your tomatoes 1^{1/2} to 2^{1/2} feet apart if plants are to be staked or grown in tomato cages. If you plan to grow your tomatoes without support, you will need to leave 3 to 4 feet between each plant.

GROWING IN CONTAINERS Tomatoes lend themselves well to growing in pots, & using sterilized potting soil, such as GARDENWORKS Planter Box Mix is an excellent way to guarantee that blight will not be present in your soil.

5-gallon black nursery pots are the perfect size for one tomato plant, & heat up in the sun providing root warmth. Dig in a few handfuls of tomato food such as Organic Flower Power 4-10-4, GARDENWORKS 10-15-20. At the same time, dig in a few handfuls of dolomite lime - this will bring down the acidity of the soil & help prevent blossom end rot.

Support your patio tomatoes as you would if growing in the ground. Cages work very well. There are dwarf varieties of tomatoes bred especially for growing in containers. Early Boy, Early Girl, Oregon Spring, Patio, Tiny Tim & Yellow Pear are good choices.

WATERING Keep plants well watered all season, especially during dry weather. Use a soft spray so as not to disturb the roots, and keep the foliage dry as much as possible! Many gardeners find that our summers are plenty rainy enough for tomatoes, in fact too much so, & prefer to grow their tomatoes under the cover of a balcony or overhang. This allows total control over watering, which is an important step in preventing blight.

FERTILIZING - ONCE GROWING Sprinkle slow-release fertilizer around your tomatoes once every 6 weeks. This could take the form of an organic fertilizer such as Harvest Farm's Flower Power 4-10-4. Feed regularly with GARDENWORKS 15-30-30, or Miracle Gro 18-18-21 Tomato Food. Don't use a strong nitrogen fertilizer. Nitrogen is represented by the 1st number on fertilizer packaging, so be certain that this number is small in comparison to the middle number.

TRAINING If you are staking your tomatoes, prune off some side branches. These branches will produce less & lower quality fruits. If you are growing your plants in a cage, no pruning is necessary, & these are easiest to use. Tomato cages are made of durable galvanized metal & once you have them, they will last for years.

DETERMINATE OR INDETERMINATE? Tomato plants are either "determinate" or "indeterminate". The indeterminate types continue to bear fruit until the frost kills them, often reaching a height of 6 ft. or more. Most of them are very large fruited & late-maturing.

Determinate types stop growing when the fruit has set on the growing end of the plant. The plants are very compact & fruits ripen almost all at once. In short-season areas this is an advantage, but we do not need to worry about shortness of season on the west coast. It is best not to prune or stake determinates. Both do well in cages.

HARVESTING The best tasting tomatoes ripen on the vine, that is a fact! Leave tomatoes on the vine until fully ripe. To pick, gently pull the fruit off the vine being careful not to bruise it. Hold the vine in one hand and pull on the tomato with the other.

When heavy frost is predicted, pick all fruits, even those at the green-white stage. Allow them to ripen at room temperature or slightly cooler. Wrap each individually in tissue or newspaper, & place them in shallow boxes, stem side down. Check the tomatoes frequently & remove any that have bad spots. Store them in the refrigerator after they reach full colour.

TOMATO BLIGHT & PREVENTION

Blight is a fungal disease of tomatoes & potatoes. This disease shows up in your garden by causing tomato leaves to have greenish-black, water-soaked blotches on older leaves & leathery, brown spots on fruit. There are several steps to follow in combating blight, & control of this disease is very important.

- Don't plant tomatoes or potatoes in the same place 2 years in a row. This disease overwinters in the soil, & will infect next years crop.
- Do not encourage excessive leaf growth by adding high-nitrogen fertilizer or fortifying the soil with manure or compost.
- Plant tomatoes & potatoes in full-sun, preferably in a spot with good air circulation.
- When watering keep the foliage dry, water the ground only, or use a soaker hose for deep watering.
- Spray tomato plants with Copper Spray when only 6" (15 cm) tall, repeat every 7-10 days during wet weather. Spray regularly beginning in July. Do not spray within 1 day of harvest. Garden sulphur can also be used (always read the instructions on the label when spraying chemicals in your garden).
- Remove any blotchy leaves immediately & put them in the garbage, not the compost.

