

# Grow Your Own Tomatoes

*There is an amazing array of tomatoes available when grow them yourself. Nothing tastes as good as a vine ripened tomato, picked yourself, and still warm from the sun. There are huge beefsteak tomatoes worth bragging about, paste tomatoes for sauces, sweet cherry tomatoes, pear-shaped tomatoes, lumpy heirlooms, and they come in all the colours you can imagine (red, pink, yellow, orange, green, purple, black).*

## PLANTING

Tomatoes require full sun, at least 6 to 8 hours of full sun per day for best production and 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, as it will help prevent a disorder called blossom end rot. Also make certain you are following good garden hygiene and rotating your crops. Crop rotation is when you make sure not to grow tomatoes or their relatives (potatoes, peppers, eggplants) for at least one year (but three is better) in the same spot. It is an important step in the control of diseases such as early and late blight.

## CHOOSING PLANTS

Some tomatoes have been bred to resist certain viruses and fungal diseases. Many varieties will have labels to let you know they have this advantage. Look for some or all of these initials on labels or seed packs, V, F, N, and T. They indicate that the variety is resistant to verticillium wilt (V), fusarium wilt (F), nematodes (N), and tobacco mosaic virus (T).

## SPACING

When planting, space your tomatoes 45 to 75cm 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 90 to 120cm between each plant.

## GROWING IN CONTAINERS

Tomatoes are great for growing in containers as they love warm soil temperatures. Use a sterilized potting soil, such as GARDENWORKS Planter Box Mix, to guarantee that your soil is free of disease. A 5-gallon black nursery pot is the perfect size for one tomato plant, and the black colour will help it heat up in the sun providing root warmth. Dig in a few handfuls of a tomato/vegetable fertilizer. To avoid the dreaded nutrient deficiency blossom end rot, remember to be consistent with watering and add a few handfuls of dolomite lime or use a specific product such as Cal-Mag or MagiCal (which contains the needed micronutrients). Remember to support your container grown tomatoes as you would if growing in the ground. Cages work very well in most containers. There are dwarf varieties of tomatoes bred especially for growing in containers. Some good ones to look for are Early Boy, Early Girl, Oregon Spring, Patio, Tiny Tim, and Sweet & Neat 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. Most gardeners find that our summers are plenty rainy enough for tomatoes, in fact perhaps too much. So, they 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. Blight is a fungal disease that needs water on the leaves to grow. If you keep the leaves dry then the blight can't grow.

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## FERTILIZING ONCE GROWING

Once your tomatoes are growing, consider sprinkling on some slow-release fertilizer following the package directions. Or a great organic option is GARDENWORKS Liquid Organic Tomato & Vegetable Food 3-1-4.

## TRAINING

If you are staking your tomatoes, prune off some side branches. These branches will produce less and will result in lower quality fruits. If you are growing your plants in a cage, less pruning is required. Tomato cages are made of durable galvanized metal and once you have them, they will last for years. The one small pruning task you should consider with tomatoes is to remove the sucker shoots that appear in the lower leaf axils. These shoots suck a lot of energy from the plant and don't produce well. Removing them give the plants more energy to produce better fruit.

## DETERMINATE OR INDETERMINATE?

Tomato plants are either "determinate" or "indeterminate." The indeterminate types continue to bear fruit until the frost kills them, but they do so by continuing to grow upwards, often reaching a height of 2m (6.5') or more. So they most definitely need some form of support. The majority of them are large fruited and late-maturing.

Determinate types stop growing when the fruit has set on the growing end of the plant. The plants are very compact and fruits ripen almost all at once. There is less need for pruning and staking (although a tomato cage is useful as a support for heavy fruit). These are great types to consider for small spaces or containers.

## HARVESTING

The best tasting tomatoes ripen on the vine, so leave your tomatoes on the vine as long as possible. 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 a heavy frost is predicted, pick all fruits, even those at the green-white stage. Allow them to ripen at room temperature, a sunny windowsill is a great place to place them. Check the tomatoes frequently and remove any that have bad spots. Once they colour up, eat them immediately. Or consider eating them green, a quick search of the internet will give you loads of recipes and inspiration.

## TOMATO BLIGHT AND PREVENTION

Blight is a fungal disease of tomatoes and potatoes. This spores of this disease are ever-present in the soil and it can show up on your tomato plants when the older leaves turn greenish-black, and looked water-soaked. The fruit develop leathery, brown spots and are inedible. Prevention and a few growing techniques are key is combating this disease.

- Don't plant tomatoes or potatoes in the same place two years in a row. The spores overwinters in the soil, and will infect next year's crop.
- Don't encourage excessive leaf growth by adding high-nitrogen fertilizer or fortifying the soil with too much manure or compost.
- Plant tomatoes and 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.
- Remove any blotchy leaves immediately and put them in the garbage, not the compost.
- You can treat the disease with a fungicide such as Copper Spray when the plants are 15 cm (6") tall, and repeat every 7-10 days during wet weather. You must continue to spray regularly beginning in July, but stop within 1 day of harvest. Garden sulphur can also be used (always read the instructions on the label when spraying chemicals in your garden).

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