



Tomatoes - General Information

The tomato, the #1 homegrown vegetable and a member of the nightshade family, is a tender perennial. While tomatoes may overwinter, it is recommended to treat them as annuals and replant each year. Tomatoes are high in Vitamins C, A, K and potassium, and contain the antioxidant lycopene. With more than 10,000 varieties, they are the fourth most popular vegetable. Botanically, a tomato is fruit, but in 1893 the US Supreme Court ruled it to be a vegetable.

Choice Considerations

Choose disease-resistant varieties. Nursery tags identify resistance (V = Verticillium wilt, F or FF = Fusarium wilt, T = Tobacco mosaic virus, N= Nematodes).

Tomato plants come in bush varieties and vine varieties. There are two types of tomatoes:

- **Determinate** – these tomatoes grow to a certain height and then set all fruit at the same time. This type is used commercially for sauces and for canning. Most home gardeners don't want all fruit at the same time.
- **Indeterminate** – these tomatoes grow, flower and set fruit during the entire season. Many home gardeners prefer to have indeterminate types and have fruit all summer.

Other choices include:

- *Early or Cool Season Tomatoes* are hybrids that set fruit in cooler temperatures. Choosing several seasonal tomatoes will provide fruit all year round.
- *Patio Tomatoes* are hybrids that stay smaller.
- *Hybrids* are bred to be resistant to verticillium and fusarium wilt, root knot nematode.
- *Heirlooms* are valued for their flavor, colors, and shapes. Some are more susceptible to disease and have a lower production than hybrids.

A final decision on how to start tomatoes:

- **Seeds** provide the best selection. Purchase at nurseries or from seed catalogs. Start indoors 6-8 weeks before last frost. Harden off seedling before planting outdoors.
- **Transplants** have a smaller selection but are easy to start. Four-inch transplants can be found at better nurseries.

Growing Requirements

- **Sun** – Tomatoes need a minimum of six hours of sun daily. They will fail to set fruit when temperatures at night are below 55°F degrees, or when daytime temperatures are over 100°F.
- **Soil** – Although tomatoes will grow in most soils with good drainage, it is recommended to amend the soil with compost for better results.
- **Mulch** – A layer of mulch will help to maintain a uniform moisture and temperature while preventing weeds.
- **Fertilizer** – Mix organic fertilizer in the planting hole when planting according to package directions. No need to fertilize again until blossoms appear. Then lightly fertilize every two to four weeks until the end of harvest.
- **Staking** – Stake at planting time. Choices include a six-foot 6 stake, a sturdy tomato cage, a concrete reinforcing screen, a spiral stake, the post and string method, a trellis, or a decorative obelisk.

Planting and Growing Tips

- Space plants 3 to 4 feet apart.
- Plant deeply to promote extra root growth and support.
- Plant transplants after last frost, usually mid to late March.
- Pick off all suckers on the lower third of the plant before planting.
- Plant up to a few inches from lowest leaves.
- Only thin the lower third of plant. Sucker growth higher up prevents sunburn.
- Choose transplants that have one main stem as are the stronger plants.
- Protect from the cold. Cut the bottom off a large soda bottle and place the remaining section over plant; remove when temperature is warmer.
- Practice crop rotation, changing location in garden every year.
- Encourage beneficial insects. Plant rosemary or colored flowers to attract them.
- Use least toxic methods to control pests.

Watering

- Water regularly to maintain uniform soil moisture. Irregular watering can result in leaf roll, blossom end rot or cracked fruit.
- Don't overwater – it will result in tasteless fruit.
- Avoid wetting foliage – this promotes disease.
- Water deeply – tomatoes are deep rooted.

Growing Tomatoes in Containers

- Choose a container that is 16 inches wide or more (15 gallon). Determinate varieties will adapt in a 5-gallon container. Make sure the container is clean.
- Fill the container with good quality potting soil.
- Add organic fertilizer according to package instructions.
- Choose a patio or bush variety for best results.
- Plant the tomato transplant deep into the soil.
- Use support – even bush varieties need a small tomato cage or other support system. Put in the support at the same time the tomato is planted in the pot.
- Water regularly. Pots dry out faster than in-ground plantings. Use a moisture meter.
- Fertilize with low nitrogen fertilizer every 2–4 weeks after blossoms appear.
- Use an attractive support system like an obelisk; plant edges with marigolds or basil.
- Tomatoes can be planted in hanging baskets, but choose a variety with smaller fruit.
- Use a clean pot and fresh soil every 3 years.
- Use all new potting soil every year.

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