

TOMATO TIME!

There's simply nothing like the flavor of homegrown tomatoes! A gardener's desire to grow these wonderful tomatoes is occasionally met with some perplexing difficulties. But with a few basic tips, I guarantee you, growing your own tomatoes can be easy *and* fun.

Getting Started

First, you'll want to decide whether to grow tomatoes from seeds or buy started plants. By starting your own seeds you initially invest more time and space starting the seeds. In the end however, you'll save money and end up with lots of plants.

Buying started plants on the other hand, may make more sense in a community garden where space is limited, and you're wanting to grow a bunch of other warm-season crops. Using started plants also makes sense when you want to grow several different varieties, or simply lack the time and space to start seeds.

Always choose the sunniest and warmest possible location within your garden plot. If your plot is still in the shade you may want to wait a bit. There's no hurry to plant tomatoes right now. But why not?!

Amend your soil with compost, and avoid too much manure. Too much manure will grow a lot of foliage but not as much fruit. We want tomatoes! I suggest that veggie gardeners amend their soil with Happy Frog Soil Conditioner or the Big Harvest Bale. Both are excellent for growing any kind of vegetables especially vegetable fruits like tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, squash, etc. Use an organic fertilizer when planting, and continue to use it according to the instructions.

Types of Tomatoes

Tomatoes can be thought of as one of two types: determinate and indeterminate. Determinate tomatoes grow to a "determined" height, about 3-5 feet, depending on the variety. Some determinate varieties remain more compact (e.g. 'Tiny Tim') growing to about 2 ft tall. Most varieties of tomatoes, however, are *indeterminate* with a rambling, vining habit growing to a potentially "undetermined" length/height - well beyond 6-8 feet or more when they're real happy.

Regardless of the type, space all your tomatoes 3 feet apart - yes those little seedlings will get *that* big when given space and proper care. Ideally, we do not want to let our tomato plants touch each other. Crowding tomatoes by spacing them too closely reduces air movement and greatly increases the chance of disease.

Planting and Growing Tomatoes

All tomatoes perform best when staked or “caged” immediately upon planting. Any plant that cannot support itself (e.g. vines, ramblers) always grow faster when provided support. A little un-staked plant wobbling around in the breeze will definitely grow up much more slowly than a tomato plant securely staked and supported right from the beginning.

Indeterminate types require a stake or cage at least 6 feet tall - remember part of the stake/cage goes in the ground. Use that plastic tie tape (the kind that expands as stems grow), and secure the main shoot every 6 inches as it grows; avoid tie-tabs or string that can cut growing stems.

As your tomato plants grows, remove any leaves and side branches on the bottom 12” of the plant. We want to end up with a 12” tall, bare trunk at the base of our tomato plants, and we do not want any part of our tomato plants touching the ground. Both increase air flow under the plant and prevent water from splashing on the foliage, again reducing the chance for disease. If the plants are not staked securely from the beginning, they will eventually sag as they grow and become heavier.

As plants continue to grow, let three or four thick, strong stems grow. Prune all other side branches. This increases air movement through the plant and further reduces the chance for disease. Besides, side branches grow more side branches; we want to grow tomatoes (i.e. the fruit of the plant), so we limit the number of branches to 3 or 4.

As your tomato plants approach 6 feet tall, cut the stem tops to prevent them growing upward. In this way they will be forced to put more energy into flowering and fruiting. Of course, if you have long or large trellises you can allow the stem to grow longer.

Watering Tomatoes

Don't forget to water your tomatoes. If they don't have enough water, the lower leaves typically turn yellow and fall off. Insufficient water will result in tomatoes with thicker skins. Some of the oldest leaves inevitably turn yellow as the plants grow and shade themselves. Remove any browning or yellowing leaves immediately. We want to see a green tomato plant!

Never water overhead! Water the ground not the plant. We never want water on the foliage, especially this close to the coast. Water on the foliage definitely increases the likelihood of diseases, especially blight. A soaker hose works great, because it keeps the water on the ground.

Tomato Diseases

Yes, those dreaded tomato diseases. Many diseases like early/late blight and the dreaded powdery mildew are spread when water gets on the foliage of the plant. Use organic fungicides like Neem Oil to treat tomato diseases. By using good culture techniques as described above, you will have way less problems:

- *Stake/support plants immediately upon planting;
- *Space plants 3 feet apart to reduce crowding and provide good air flow.
- *No leaves/stems/side branches touching the soil; create a 12" trunk.
- *Prune side branches to increase air flow.
- *Don't forget to water. Water the ground, not the foliage.
- *Avoid planting tomatoes in the exact same location two years in a row.

Powdery Mildew

So what about this powdery mildew? You've probably seen it on your squash, cucumbers, beans, peas, and other crops. It looks like a fine layer of baby powder on the foliage of the plant, always starting with the oldest leaves first.

Let's dispel a little confusion. THIS IS IMPORTANT! Getting water on the foliage is what causes powdery mildew to spread, *once the plant already has the disease*.

But the main reason tomatoes and other crops like squash and cucumbers *initially contract the disease* is LACK OF WATER. A plant wilting or lacking water is unable to perform simple biological functions and becomes way more susceptible to getting any kind of disease, *especially powdery mildew*. All along the west coast of North America, if you underwater your tomatoes, or plants wilt even just a couple of times, you will always get powdery mildew.

Immediately take samples or photos of your sick plants to your favorite independent garden center to get your problem diagnosed; learn what's going on.

Have Fun!

If you apply these basic growing principles above, and keep your tomatoes watered, I guarantee you will have fun growing tomatoes this year! Here are a few of my favorite varieties.

CHUCK'S FAVORITE TOMATOES...JUST A FEW!

Large, slicing tomatoes

Beefsteak - very productive slicing tomato

Better Boy - the BEST large, slicing tomato for the coast!

Kellogg's Breakfast - beautiful, huge, orange tomatoes
Mr. Stripey - low acid, colorful heirloom variety

Medium-sized

Early Girl - an old tried and true standard; disease resistant
Green Zebra - unusual color and flavor - awesome!
Stupice - excellent flavored heirloom for the coast and winter growing
Celebrity - nematode and disease resistant!

Small/Cherry

SunGold - an orange cherry-type and THE SWEETEST tomato!
Yellow Pear - small, flavorful, yellow, pear-shaped tomatoes
Sweet 100 - sprays with lots of small cherry tomatoes.
Black Cherry - Heirloom; rich, smoky flavored, dark red cherry tomatoes.

Determinate

Celebrity - highly productive; disease resistant.
Oregon Spring - highly productive; amazing flavor; great on coast!
Patio - dwarf, richly flavored, golf ball-sized tomatoes.
Sub Arctic - Phil's favorite!