



Gardeners Helping Gardeners Succeed

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All About Tomatoes

Planting

Tomatoes are warm-season plants and should be planted at least one week after the average last frost, which is Memorial Day in our area. Temperature is a most important factor, and tomatoes are particularly sensitive to night-time temperatures. In early spring when day temperatures are warm but nights fall below 55 degrees F, many varieties will not set fruit. In summer you can expect blossom drop when days are above 90 degrees, or nights above 76 degrees F.

Soil for tomatoes should be well drained and have a good supply of nutrients, especially phosphorus. To prepare soil, use plenty of organic matter, such as **Paydirt** or **Bumper Crop Black Soil Conditioner**. Add **Master Nursery Master Start** at planting time.

Most gardeners start tomatoes with transplants, which are usually available here at the garden center in April. To start your own transplants, sow seed 1/2 inch deep in peat pots 5 to 7 weeks before the outdoor planting date. The last ten days before planting out, gradually expose the seedling to more sunlight and outdoor temperatures.

Transplants should be stocky, not leggy, and should have 4 to 6 true leaves, young and succulent. Set transplants deep: the first leaf just above the soil level. Plant leggy plants with the root ball horizontal. Roots will form along the buried stem and make subsequent growth better. If cold or wind are threats, use **hot caps** or other protection, such as the **Wall O'Water**.

Fertilization

The first fertilizer application will take care of the plant until it blooms. Feed then and once a month while the fruits are developing, with **Master Nursery Bud N' Bloom**, **Best 16-16-16** or organically with **Down to Earth Vegetable 4-4-4**, and stop when they near mature size.

Tomatoes require uniform moisture after fruit has set: alternate wet and dry spells can bring on stunting and blossom-end rot. In the early stages, if careful not to overdo it, you can stretch watering intervals to put the plant under a little stress—it's a good way to bring on tomato production.

To get more fruit over a longer period allow one sucker to grow from near the base to form a two-stemmed plant, and later remove the rest of the suckers on both stems.

Any tomato that can be grown in a vegetable garden can also be grown in a container.

Training

Tomatoes can be grown on upright stakes, trellises, and in wire cages, or on horizontal trellises or ladder-like frames set a foot above ground level. All will keep fruits from contact with the soil and reduce damage from slugs, cracking, sunscald, and decay. In wet fall climates the yield of usable tomatoes can nearly be doubled by so protecting the fruit.

Problems & Diseases

Blossom-end rot: Symptoms of this disease appear as a leathery scar or rot on the blossom-end of fruits. It can occur at any stage of development and is usually caused by sudden changes in soil moisture, most serious when fast-growing plants are hit by a hot, dry spell. Lack of calcium is another cause. Mulching with organic material, which reduces fluctuations in soil moisture and temperature, and avoiding planting in poorly drained soil, will help prevent blossom-end rot.

Curled leaves: Leaf curl is more pronounced in some varieties, and you can expect it during hot, dry spells and during and after a long, wet period. Heavy pruning also seems to encourage leaf curl.

Failure to set fruit/Blossom drop: It takes about 50 hours for the pollen to germinate and the tube to grow down the pistil to the ovary. At night temperatures below 55 degrees F., germination and tube growth are so slow that blossoms drop off before they can be fertilized. As a rule, most early-maturing varieties set fruit at lower temperatures than the main-season kinds. Fruit set can also be increased by shaking the plant, or vibrating it, to release pollen for pollination. When plants are trained on stakes, hitting the top of the stakes will have the same effect.

Poor fruit color: Temperatures above 86 degrees F. can prevent the normal development of red fruit color and fruits may sunscald. Where high temperatures are the rule, choose varieties with a dense foliage cover.

Tomato Varieties

In checking tomato varieties, note especially those with **resistance to soil-borne pests**. Their resistance is indicated by the initials "V" for verticillium; "F" for fusarium; and "N" for nematodes. It may be that your soil is not infested with any of these pests, however, if you've had any trouble with tomatoes in the past, favor the resistant varieties.

The number of days shown on charts refers to the time from setting out transplants to the first fruits. It is an average figure only.

The growth habit of the variety is indicated by the words "determinate" or "indeterminate."

Determinate varieties are the bush kinds, generally growing to 3 feet or less. **Indeterminate** are tall-growing and are trained with stakes, trellis or wire cage.