

Caring for Tomatoes

Watering

Tomatoes need at least 1 to 1½ inches of water per week from rain or irrigation; more during very hot weather. For deep root growth, water thoroughly and deeply – deep, infrequent watering (every 3 or 4 days) is better than daily sprinkling, which encourages pest and disease problem. Allow the soil to become somewhat dry before watering again. Hand watering with a hose, watering can, drip irrigation or a soaker hose are ideal watering methods because they direct water to the root area, save water and avoid wetting leaves, flowers and fruit.

Mulch

Apply 2 to 3 inches of organic mulch like wood chips, shredded bark or chips, grass clippings. Cover bare soil with black or red plastic film or newspaper or to help conserve soil moisture, warm soil and prevent weed growth, eliminating or reducing the need for hand or chemical weed control.

Staking

Although tomatoes are vines that will grow quite happily sprawling along the ground, most home gardeners prefer to use stakes, cages or trellis to support the vines, to keep the fruit off the ground, improve yield and make harvesting fruit easier. Drive stakes, cages or trellis into the ground before or right after planting so as not to disturb roots later. Tie up branches as needed, not too tightly, using natural fiber jute or cotton twine, plastic coated wire twist ties or stretch-tie.

Additional Fertilizing

Tomatoes are “heavy feeders” once they start growing. Side dress (place additional fertilizer around the plants) with *Tomato-tone*, 5-10-10 or 5-10-5 or similar complete fertilizer. This will increase the amount and quality of fruit. Make the first application when fruit begins forming; repeat 4-6 weeks later.

Harvesting

Pick fruit as soon as it ripens (turns from green to red, yellow, orange, etc.). Green (un-ripe) fruit can be picked for pickling or frying any time. Remove and discard any spotted, rotting or blemished fruit to encourage new fruit to form.

Pest Problems

Tomato varieties vary in their insect and disease susceptibility. Some are virtually trouble-free while others highly susceptible to problems. Choose disease-resistant hybrids (see “Disease Tolerance Initials” below) when possible. Pesticides can’t cure several common tomato diseases or disorders. Old fashioned (a.k.a. heirloom) varieties of tomatoes are usually not as disease resistant as newer hybrids. Keep your garden clean and weed-free, and be alert for early signs of trouble to reduce the need for pesticides.

To prevent the spread of leaf diseases, avoid overhead watering if possible and water early in the morning to allow the plants to dry quickly. Too much watering can lead to blossom-end-rot on fruit and a variety of other problems. The most common insect pests are aphids, whiteflies, caterpillars, (tomato hornworm) and fleabeetles. Infestations are more easily controlled when detected and treated early, before the problem has a chance to expand.

There are a number of safe, organic remedies as well as chemical pesticides available for controlling insects and diseases of tomatoes. Accurate identification of the insect or disease is the first step. Stop by our Garden Care Remedy department for advice for the safest and most effective problem solver for your needs. Bring in samples for an accurate diagnosis.



Terms to Know

Determinate – These varieties stop growing once fruit is set, so staking or caging is usually not necessary. Harvest time is short as all the fruit develops and ripens at about the same time. These varieties are often used for making sauce, canning and juicing.

Indeterminate – These varieties keep producing new shoots and blossoms after fruit sets, continually producing until frost kills them. All stages of development may be on the plant at once. Pick fruit as often as it ripens. The more you pick, the more you’ll get.

Heirloom – This means the variety has been in cultivation for at least 50 years. They are usually open-pollinated varieties.

Open-pollinated (OP) – This is a variety that is naturally pollinated by exposure to bird and insects (bees) and produces seeds that grow into plants with tomatoes that look and taste like the parent so you can save the seeds from year to year.

Hybrid – Controlled, cross-pollinated varieties, usually with the goal of producing plants resistant to a particular disease or pest. Seeds of hybrids will often produce a wide variation of undesirable characteristics in their offspring.

Disease Tolerance Initials – For varieties that exhibit tolerance to certain diseases, look for the variety name followed by the initials V, F, N, T and/or A, which indicates that this plant variety, under normal growth conditions and health, has demonstrated a higher resistance to these common tomato problems: Verticillium wilt (V), Fusarium wilt (F), Nematodes (N), Tobacco mosaic virus (T) and Alternaria (A).

Shopping List:

- Tomato Seedlings
- Spading Fork
- Tomato-tone
- Mulch
- Lime
- Soaker Hose
- Stakes or Cages
- Trowel

Growing Great Tomatoes

It's the most popular vegetable crop in home gardens



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Tomatoes are easy to grow, rewarding the novice and experienced gardener alike with an abundance of tasty, juicy and healthy fruit. Nothing beats a homegrown tomato – especially one you've grown yourself!



Growing from Seed

Tomatoes can be started indoors for transplanting outside later or they can be purchased as ready-to-plant transplants in small pots, cell packs, flats or trays.

If seeds are sown indoors for later transplant, they should be sown in plastic pots, trays, cells etc., or peat pots filled with a soil-less mix such as *Pro-Mix*. Peat pellets (*Jiffy 7's*) can also be used. Containers or trays should have holes in the bottom for drainage of excess water.

Place your seedlings close to a light source (sunny windowsill or under lights) for at least 8 to 10 hours daily. Insufficient light will result in weak, spindly seedlings. Keep them at room temperature (68 – 70° F). Start seeds indoors 4 to 6 weeks before the last frost; here on Long Island that means around early April or later.

Planting Outdoors

Choosing a Location

To be productive, tomatoes need full sun for at least 6 to 8 hours a day in an open area away from shade producing trees, buildings or structures. A southern exposure is best.

The soil should be loose and easy to work where water drains away within a few hours after a heavy rain.

Preparing Soil

Soil preparation is essential for good production. A week or so before it's time to plant your tomatoes, deeply spade (turn over and loosen) the soil to a depth of 6 to 10 inches. Improve sandy and clay soils by mixing in at least 2 inches of compost, manure or peat moss to improve drainage and aeration. Raised beds can be used to ensure adequate drainage in poorly drained or compacted areas.

The right soil pH will ensure that the fertilizer works properly. We can test the pH of your while you wait; bring in a small, dry soil sample. Tomatoes and vegetables prefer a soil pH around 6.2 to 6.8. Most soils in our area are acidic and require lime to correct pH. Incorporate lime and fertilizer into the top 4 to 6 inches of soil then rake the soil surface smooth.

Fertilizer and lime applications should be based on the results of a soil test. In the absence of a soil test, add tomato and vegetable fertilizer such as *Tomato-tone*, 5-10-5 or 5-10-10, according to label instructions.

Avoid working the soil while it is wet (in early spring) since this can cause compaction and poor air, water and root penetration.



When and How to Plant

Plant your tomatoes outdoors when all danger of frost has passed and the soil has warmed to above 55°F; here on L.I., that is around May 15. Seedlings can be injured (stunted) by cold and killed by frost.

Harden-off (acclimate) the young seedlings by placing them outdoors a few days before planting them in the ground to get them used to the outdoor conditions.



Plant the seedlings with the top of the roots just under the surface of the soil; they can be planted deeper, but no deeper than the first set of leaves. If your seedlings are in peat pots, remove

the upper edges of the peat pots so that the pot will not act as a wick, pulling water away from the roots. Once planted, water the seedlings thoroughly. Pay close attention to watering the first few weeks but don't overdo it.

Growing Tomatoes in Containers

Any tomato that is grown in a garden can be grown in a container. There are just a few requirements.

A Suitable-Sized Container – Mid- to large-size varieties such as Beefsteak, Bigboy, Celebrity, Whopper, etc., and most Heirloom varieties require a large tub or container (20" or more in diameter) with a capacity of 10



gallons or more. Bush or dwarf-type varieties such as Husky and Patio can be grown in smaller containers (12" or more in diameter) with a 1-2 gallon capacity. Only put one plant in each container; however, up to four bush or dwarf-type plants may be grown in large tubs or containers (20" or more in diameter).

A Good Potting Mix – Use Premier's *Pro-Mix* or any good quality potting mix that will hold moisture well. Mixing a water-holding polymer like *Soil Moist* into the soil before planting will improve the water-holding capacity of potting mixes. Do not use soil from the garden; it will be unproductive in a container and may contain pest problems.

Water – Keep soil evenly moist. Check daily and water only if needed. Avoid excessive watering, which will wash out nutrients and lead to poor productivity and problems such as blossom end rot.

Nutrients – At time of planting, use a time-release fertilizer such as *Osmocote* mixed into the soil; or, during the growing season, use any well-balanced fertilizer like *Miracle-Gro*. An organic option for fertilizing during the growing season is *Fish Emulsion* and *Seaweed* (kelp). Use fertilizers according to label instructions.

Sunlight – Tomatoes require full sun to be the most productive, but they will still produce fruit with a little shade.

Staking – Most varieties of tomatoes will need to be staked or somehow provided support as they grow. Tomato cages, sturdy wood, bamboo or metal stake work well. Use natural fiber (cotton or jute) twine, plastic stretch ribbon or plastic coated wire (twist-tie). Loosely tie up branches as needed.