

Tomatoes



You can't beat the flavour of home-grown tomatoes straight from the vine.

Sow your tomato seeds in March or April, approximately 6-8 weeks before the final frost of the winter, or earlier if you're growing your tomatoes in a greenhouse. Sprinkle the seed thinly onto good quality seed compost. Cover with 1.5mm of compost and water lightly with a fine-rose watering can. Keep the compost moist but be careful not to over-water as wet conditions can encourage "damping-off" disease, and other mould problems. Tomato seeds usually germinate in 7 to 14 days. After germination remove the smaller plant.

Pot on the tomato seedlings as soon as they're big enough to handle. Hold the plants by the leaves, taking care not to touch the stems, and transplant them

into 7.5cm (3in) pots. Protect the plants from frost, cold winds, and draughts which might kill them.

Tomato plants need a lot of water and feed if they're to produce a bountiful crop. For best results, water little and often. Some gardeners leave a few filled watering cans to warm in their greenhouse, so the water is not shockingly cold from the tap or water butt.

Some people claim that watering at the same time each day makes a difference to the quality of the crop! Feed your tomatoes with a **general liquid** feed until the first truss has formed then alternate with a **high potash feed** to encourage more flowers and fruit.



Plant the young plants outdoors when they are about 15-20cm (6-8in) tall and the flowers of the first truss are just beginning to open.

Plant your tomatoes about 45cm (18in) apart, leaving 75cm (30in) between rows, and if you're planting into a grow bag, limit yourself to two plants per bag. Tomatoes prefer a temperature of 21 - 24C (70 - 75F) and will perform poorly at temperatures above 27C (81F) or below 16C (61F). For best results,

choose trusted favourites like '**Gardener's Delight**', '**Money Maker**' or 'Sweet Olive'.

For the best quality fruit it's best to limit the number of fruit trusses to six per plant. If the vine doesn't reach the top of its support by late summer, cut out the main tip anyway to give the remaining fruits time to ripen.

Determinate varieties (bush/dwarf types) don't need pruning or training and happily sprawl along the ground or around the pot they're growing in.

Determinate varieties can stop flower production after several trusses, but you can encourage continued upward growth by training up the topmost side shoot.

Start picking your tomatoes as the fruits ripen and gain full colour. When frost threatens at the end of the season, lift any plants with unripe fruit on them and hang them upside down under cover. Tomatoes can be successfully frozen if you find you have a glut.

Common problems with tomato plants



Tomato blight

A common problem caused by wet weather, particularly with outdoor plants, tomato blight spreads fast, leaving telltale brown patches all over the plant. Not only does blight kill vines, it also rots the fruit.

Fruit problems

Irregular watering, or too much water too late in the growth cycle causes fruiting problems like:

Blossom End Rot: Dark patch at the base of the fruit, more common if the plant is grown in a grow bag.

Blossom Drop: Flower bud falls off.

Dry Set: Fruitlet growth stops when the fruit is the size of a match head.

Splitting fruit

The key to a healthy crop of tomatoes is regular, even watering, delivered to the base of the plant. Too much water too late tends to be the problem in most cases.

Too much direct sunlight can also damage your crop. Tomatoes need high light intensity to grow well, but too much can cause blotches, scalds or spots on the developing fruit. 'Greenback' is a common problem caused by too much sunlight, leaving the ripe fruit with a hard-green area on its 'shoulder'.

Insect pests

Look out for green and white fly because both can spread viruses. Spray your vines with a recommended insecticide as soon as you notice pests. Organic gardeners might prefer to plant marigold varieties like '**Tomato Growing Secret**' nearby which attract beneficial insects that eat pests.

Leaf problems

Curling leaves. May be caused by aphids sucking the sap from them, but if there's no sign of insects the most likely culprit is cold night-time temperatures (more noticeable in early summer). If this is the case, it's nothing to worry about.

Mosaic patterns, streaks or distorted leaf surfaces. Your tomatoes may have a virus, in which case your best bet is to remove and destroy them before the problem spreads. Always disinfect tools, boots, and gloves after handling diseased plants.

Leaf yellowing starting on older leaves and moving upwards. The problem could be a magnesium deficiency which is easy to remedy with a special **magnesium feed**.