

Tomato Growing Tips

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This is not a complete guide to tomato culture, but I tried to cover some of the more common mistakes I see people make. Growing good tomatoes is a fine craft, but there is a lot of science behind it, too. Learn all you can about tomatoes, their diseases, the bugs that prey on them, and the beneficial bugs that control the bad bugs, and how to build healthy soil, to really master the art.

*As for heirlooms, there is a wide range of them, some great, some not so great. The best of them, the ones we focus on, have exquisite flavor (why else grow them?) **and** are healthy and give us solid productivity. Some people are not fans of heirlooms. In my experience, these people tried one that wasn't a great producer, or they have never tried one at all and they are just repeating what they have heard others say. Contrary to what these people say, heirloom tomatoes are not finicky or disease prone. **(Why would people save the seed for generations if the plants were not productive or healthy??)***

*Most heirloom tomatoes are indeterminate, meaning they will grow and fruit all season once they start. A well grown indeterminate tomato plant should keep yielding until the first good freeze in fall, and if **most** of yours are not doing this almost every year, you are doing something wrong. (I say this with love, and having made many mistakes myself.) The good news is that you can figure out what your mistakes are and fix them. As an example, I have many customers who experience good, heavy yields every year, despite their neighbors' experiencing blight on their standard hybrid types. You **can** prevent disease with good plants and sound cultural practices.*

- Choose a site that has full sun, especially morning sun.
- Amend your soil as needed with plenty of compost from a trusted source. If you are getting compost that started out as animal poo, ask the animal's owner what kind of medications the animal has had, as some of the newer varieties of animal drugs contain broadleaf- specific herbicides that pass through the animal's gut and into their poo. These will kill your plants can ruin your soil for years.
- Dig a hole deep enough to bury your plant almost up to the very top.
- Put a scoop of compost and a table spoon of Epsom salt in the hole.
- Just before planting, carefully pinch off all the leaves along the portion of the plant that will be buried.
- If needed, loosen the roots that have formed inside the pot.
- Place the plant in the hole, and fill the hole with water, then backfill with dirt.
- Provide enough space for each plant, at least 2-3 feet. Using the wider spacing with staggered plantings of smaller plants like Serata Basil or gem marigolds has worked very well for us.
- At planting time, set up whatever system you plan to use to support them. Just look online for plenty of fabulous tomato support ideas, and lots of crummy ones, too. Regardless, standard cages will not be enough for most of our varieties.

- Also at planting time, or before, mulch. You may use black or red plastic sheeting, weed barrier, cardboard, or newspaper. The latter two go in place more easily when wet, and will need grass clippings to cover them from day one. Plastic mulches will also need clippings or other mulch when the weather grows very hot, in order to moderate soil temperatures.
- Tomatoes need consistent amounts of water. When it is very hot, they need at least 1 inch a week, maybe more if you are growing in raised beds. If they are not getting this amount, you must provide it. Ideally, do this with drip lines. If watering with overhead techniques, water in the morning, directing the water gently to the base of the plant.
- Whether by drip or overhead, it is best to water deeply once or twice a week, not shallowly every day.
- Feed your tomatoes regularly. We use tomato tone roughly by the directions on the bag, and another secret ingredient that you'll have to ask us about.
- To sucker or not to sucker? Suckering, or the practice of pinching off new leaders which emerge between leaves and the main stem, can be both good and bad for the plant. The best way I have found is to limit the plant to three or, at most, four leaders, and pinch off the rest. For an article that goes into great detail about pruning tomato plants, look up Pruning Tomatoes by Frank Ferrandino, which appeared in the excellent but long gone magazine, Kitchen Gardening. It is archived on the Fine Gardening website. There are other publications related to tomato pruning, and every other aspect of tomato culture, on various state Ag extension sites.
- Follow nature's lead and think of your garden as an environment, not just a monoculture. Bugs are attracted to large plantings of one thing, and diseases spread like wildfire through them. Interplant your tomatoes with good companion plants- basil, marigolds, borage, nasturtiums, calendula. Learn about beneficial insects and use plants to attract them throughout the garden.
- Don't buy some of your plants from nurseries that are using organic practices, and some from plant factories that are already suppressing diseases with chemicals before you even buy the plants. You could infect the whole lot.
- If you do have a sick plant, discard it immediately. Don't try to nurse it back to health (you most likely won't succeed), while it propagates the disease and spreads it to your other plants. Plant a couple of "spares" so you won't hesitate to do throw one away if it comes to that. Burn it or put it in the trash. Don't compost it.
- Don't handle your plants while they are wet or while you are using or have just used tobacco products, and don't let folks smoke or use tobacco in any form in your garden.
- The conventional wisdom is to rotate your plantings from year to year. We rotate, but having said that, I know many people who just grow a few tomatoes in the same spot for years with no problems.
- Enjoy the time you get to spend with your plants. Lay eyes on them daily and get to know them well, so you will keep on top of pruning, staking, feeding, and pest and disease control.
- Try multiple varieties. Some may do better than others for you, and you may be surprised by which ones turn out to be favorites. For instance, I was sure I would not like Aunt Ruby's German Green, but it is a local heirloom and a good seller, and I wanted to save local seed for it, so I grew a few. Oh man, they were good. So tasty, beautiful, and productive. Now I grow that one for myself almost every year.