



Growing Tomatoes in the Home Garden

Deciding Which Varieties to Grow

- Determine intended uses – eating fresh, drying, canning, or making sauce
- Assess available garden space – how many plants and which type
- Choose between starting from seeds or purchasing plants, and
- Know if determinate or indeterminate tomatoes will work best for your garden.

Type of Tomato	Space / Support Requirements/ Growth Habit	Harvest
Determinate	Less / can do with less support / bushy	Fruits ripen about the same time
Indeterminate	More / need sturdy support / keeps growing	Fruits ripen over a long season

Starting from Seeds

There is more variety and less cost than potted plants, and it gives joy seeing them grow.

- **Germinate the seeds** in early March (8 weeks before last frost, May 1-10 here). Place moist seedling mix in small pots (1-1.5"), firm the soil, drop in one seed, and cover it with 1/4" peat or starter mix. Keep the seed starts warm (65° to 70° F) using a bottom heat mat and a cover to keep them from drying out. They should germinate and sprout in 6 to 10 days. Give seedlings ample light to grow.
- **Repot seedlings** into 3-4" pots at second set of true leaves. Use moist seedling mix for this repotting session. To repot or transplant tomatoes: **1.** Hydrate seedling mix; **2.** Water plant thoroughly prior to repotting or transplanting with room temperature water; **3.** Handle seedlings by leaves, not the stem; **4.** Place the plant deeper in the new pot, (Tomato plants grow roots all along the buried stem); **5.** Firm soil around the plant; leave 1/2" at the top; **6.** Water to assure good contact between roots and soil mix; **7.** Place plant in a warm, sunny location (8+ hours of sun), away from wind.
- **Repot second time** into a gallon-sized pot when plant is 6"-10" tall. The steps are: **1.** Hydrate potting soil; **2.** Hydrate the plant by floating pot in a bucket of water until bubbling stops and pot sinks to the bottom; **3.** Remove/pinch off leaves that will touch or be below the soil level and gently remove plant from pot. Follow steps 4 through 7 above. Protect plants from cold by surrounding them with water-filled milk jugs, coverings of fabric or plastic wrap, or putting plant next to a wall or fence. "Harden off" the plant anytime after the first repotting at 3". Begin with a couple hours in the shade and over 7-10 days work up to having the plant in full sun all day.

Planting into the Ground Plant is ready to go into the ground when 10-15" tall, and soil temperature is 60° F, (in June). Prepare the site and plant as follows: **1.** Select a site with 8+ hours of sun, loamy soil, and little wind, (avoid low areas where water and cold air settles and can harm plant); **2.** Work soil 10 inches deep by turning with a shovel; **3.** Add 2 inches of compost, and work it in well; **4.** Hydrate the plant 1 to 2 hours before transplanting using the bucket method above; **5.** Prune lower leaves and all suckers (side shoots where a mature leaf joins the stem) below the first blooms; and **6.** Select a planting method.

Trench Method: Pros – roots are in warmest soil; good for leggy plants. Cons – requires frequent watering and careful, shallow cultivation.

Dig a trench 8"-10" deep; add fertilizer and lime (based on soil test) to the bottom; cover amendments with 1" -2" soil to prevent burning roots. Lay plant on its side, fill hole with soil, water, and push dirt

up to pillow the stem. The plant will straighten up quickly. Place a marker at the root ball end to help prevent root damage when weeding. Add support structure at planting to avoid root damage.

Vertical Method: Pros – larger reservoir of moisture available to roots; less cracking. Cons – deeper soil is cooler, causing slower growth & fruit ripening.

Dig a 10" deep hole, add fertilizer and lime, cover as with the Trench Method. Place plant deeper to promote buried stem root growth. Fill soil to ground level, water and add support structure.

Cultural Practices

- **Support** both determinate and indeterminate tomato types to improve air movement and to discourage diseases and pests. Tomato supports vary from hoop-style tomato cages to lattices, stakes, and concrete reinforcing wire. Anchor supports with 2"X2" stakes for extra stability.
- **Mulch** helps minimize weeds, retains soil moisture, and prevents soil-borne diseases. Plastic mulch (clear, black or red) helps warm the soil, can be placed before or at tomato planting. Organic mulch improves the soil but must be placed after the soil warms in late June.
- **Pruning** indeterminate plants helps ripen fruit and prevent disease. Decide how many main stems your plant will have and allow only selected side shoots to develop. As the plant grows, thin to see into plant.

Other Tips

- If flea beetle damage occurs on young plants (lots of small holes in leaves), fertilize for stronger growth. Usually no other treatment is needed if the plant is strong.
- In dry or hot weather, soak the soil with at least 1 inch of water every 7 to 10 days.
- To promote fruit ripening, 30 days before the first frost (August/September) stop watering, remove new blossoms and immature tomatoes that won't ripen before frost.
- Cover the plant with plastic to protect from rain and cooler temperatures and to extend the productive season. Or harvest the larger green tomatoes, place them in a single layer (not touching) in a warm (65° to 70° F), dark location to continue ripening indoors.
- Remove all plant debris at season's end to help reduce future pests and diseases.
- Rotate crops – wait 3 to 4 years before planting tomato family (tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, and potatoes) members in the same spot.

OSU Extension Service Resources <http://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/>

Blossom-End Rot of Tomatoes FS 139

10-Minute University™ videos

Tomato Varieties <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0Sl3YWDazo>

Starting Tomatoes from Seeds <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zs0lZNMluzA>

Planting Tomatoes in Your Garden <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pucpx5fuKdk>

Proven Cultural Practices https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpVBg-e_1vE

Master Gardener™ Advice

- Call the Home Horticulture Helpline: 503-655-8631 (Clackamas County), 503-821-1150 (Washington County), 503-445-4608 (Multnomah County).
- For 10-Minute University™ handouts and videos, visit www.cmastergardeners.org

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