

Growing Delicious Tomatoes in the Backyard



There are few things in life more satisfying than biting into a vine-ripe, homegrown tomato. There are as many “best” tomatoes as there are taste buds, but they all require plenty of light, plenty of water, and plenty of care.

Where to Plant

Pick a location that does not hold water and receives as much direct sunlight as possible. Make sure the soil pH is above 6.0 and adequate nutrients are present. The best way to do this is with a soil test. Add compost, aged manure, or other organic matter to the planting area if it is very sandy. Tomatoes need a well-drained root zone, so they are generally planted in beds rather than on the flat.

Varieties

This is where those personal preferences come in. Some people like “old-timey flavor,” and heirlooms like German, Oxheart, Marion, and Ponderosa are the only varieties for them. Other folks have old favorites like Better Boy, Celebrity, or Big Boy. Some people only like cherry tomatoes like Sweet 100 and Cherry Grande, while others want canning tomatoes like Roma and LaRossa. Many gardeners want the newest thing like the Mountain varieties from North Carolina or “grape” tomatoes.

If you do not have any experience with growing tomatoes, try to pick a variety with as many letters after the name as possible. The letters all have meanings: F means fusarium tolerance, V means verticillium tolerance, TMV means tobacco mosaic virus tolerance, and N means nematode tolerance. All of these are pests of tomato plants and can cause problems.

There may also be a D or I behind the variety name. Determinate (D) plants will produce short vines with five to seven clusters of fruit, and then stop bearing. Indeterminate (I) plants can grow as long as 15 feet

and will keep bearing until weather conditions prevent pollination or frost kills the plant. Gardeners who wish to harvest only a few tomatoes at one time generally grow indeterminate plants.

Selecting Transplants

Select transplants that are healthy and have no obvious defects. Remove the transplant from the container and make sure the roots are white. Bigger transplants are not always better; the plants should look stocky and not slender.

Setting Out Plants

Make the planting hole deep enough so that the bottom true leaves are even with the surface of the ground. This means burying the two small leaves that come out of the stalk. Burying deeply gives the transplant a better chance at survival and earlier fruit. Be sure to water the transplants well and give them their first pesticide treatment on the day they are planted. Tomato plants can become very large, so allow at least 12 to 15 square feet per plant.

Pest Control

Mississippi’s climate is ideal for many insects and diseases that attack tomatoes. Although it is possible to grow tomatoes without using pesticides, it is very risky. The best method is to use both an insecticide and a fungicide on a preventive basis once a week. Be sure to start the day the plants are set out. Covering the plant with the spray is just as important as using the correct pesticide, and timely application is probably more important. Consult the *Garden Tabloid*, Extension Publication 1091, for the proper pesticides to use for each pest.

Watering

Tomatoes are relatively deep-rooted, and the plants will stay alive during drought, but the crop really needs an inch of water each week to produce quality fruit.

Blossom end rot occurs when the fruit are growing without enough water. The end away from the stem turns dark brown to black and stops growing. Once the fruit develops blossom end rot, it should be removed and discarded.

You can apply water with sprinklers, soaker hoses, or drip tubing, or by flooding the middles. Sprinklers wet the leaves and should be turned off early in the afternoon to allow the leaves to dry before sundown. Wet leaves encourage fungal leaf diseases.

Suckering

Determinate tomatoes should have only the first sucker removed. Indeterminate plants should have the first three suckers removed, leaving the one beneath the first lower cluster. These tiny branches growing in the leaf axils can be used to start more plants by sticking them in the ground.

Staking

Tomato plants are tied to stakes to keep the fruit from touching the ground. Stakes can be wood, bamboo, rebar, or any material that supports 20 pounds of tomato plant. The tying material can be cotton twine, old pantyhose, rags, or any soft, non-abrasive material. Nylon twine should not be used because it tends to cut the tomato vine. Vines should be tied at 1-foot intervals. Cages work well with determinate varieties.

Side-Dressing

When the first fruit are about the size of a quarter, add nitrogen fertilizer at the rate of 1 pint of fertilizer per 100 feet of row. If you did not have your soil tested, or if you have had problems with blossom end rot, use calcium nitrate. If you know your soil calcium levels are above 1,500 pounds per acre, any nitrogen source will do.

Harvesting

Tomatoes start ripening from the blossom end. For the sweetest, most flavorful tomatoes, allow the top of the tomato to get red before harvesting. The riper the tomato, the less acidic it tastes. If you are going to can red ripe tomatoes, add lemon juice to prevent microorganism growth.

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By David Nagel, PhD, Extension Professor, Plant and Soil Sciences.



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