

Growing Tomatoes

Tomatoes are a warm season crop that can be very prolific if handled properly. They come in a wide range of flavors, colors, and sizes and have a wide variety of uses.



Selecting and Preparing a Site

Tomatoes require a minimum of six hours of direct sun daily. They prefer slightly acidic (pH 6.2–6.8), fertile, loamy, well-draining soil. Soil testing is recommended to determine soil pH and nutrient status. Apply fertilizer and lime as directed by soil test results. Plant tomatoes in different spots from year to year to reduce disease.



Planting

If starting seeds indoors, sow tomato seeds 6–8 weeks before the plants will be set in the garden. During the last week before transplanting, place them outdoors during the day and withhold water, but not to the point of wilting, to harden the plants and get them accustomed to outdoor conditions. Keep in mind that tomatoes take 60 to more than 100 days to harvest. Due to this long growing season many gardeners plant “starter plants” instead of seeds.

Whether starting from seeds at home or purchasing from a nursery, tomato transplants should be 6–9 inches tall with stems about the width of a pencil and a leaf spread about equal to its height when planted outdoors.

Tomatoes are warm season crops that cannot bear frost. In Pennsylvania, plant tomatoes in mid/late May to early June when the soil temperature has reached 65°F.

Work compost into the soil before planting and add bonemeal to the planting hole when transplanting. Space plants 18 inches apart and plant transplants 5 inches deep. Create wells near the stems and water thoroughly. Place tomato stakes or cages in the soil at planting to keep developing fruit off the ground and help the plant stay upright. If using stakes, insert them 3–4 inches from the stem at planting. Stakes should be strong, 6 feet tall, and placed 12 inches into the ground. Attach ties to the stake and gently to the plant at 8- to 12-inch intervals as the plant grows.

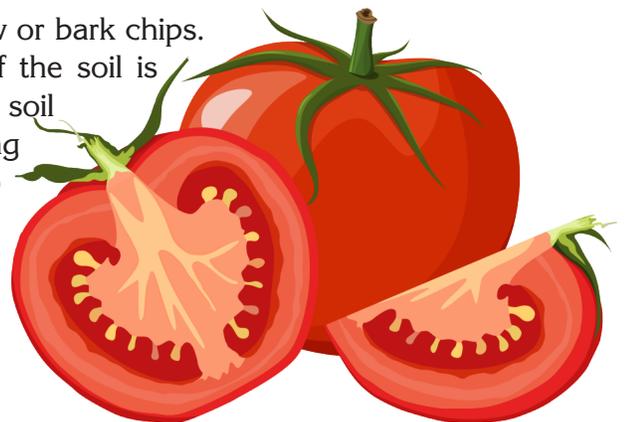
Tomatoes can also be grown in large pots or containers that are at least 20 inches in diameter. Cherry tomatoes grow well in pots. Tall varieties may need to be staked. Containers should have drainage holes in the bottom. Use loose, well-draining soil such as a “potting mix” with added organic material. Plant one tomato plant per pot and place in an area that receives at least 6 hours of sun per day. Maintain moist soil. Soil in containers will dry out more quickly than garden soil so check regularly and provide extra water during hot, dry periods.



Caring for the Site

Mulch plants with 2–3 inches of seed-free straw or bark chips.

Tomatoes need steady, consistent moisture. If the soil is dry at 2 inches deep, provide water. Water the soil and not the leaves. Watering in the early morning ensures that plants have enough moisture to make it through hot summer days. When plants start flowering, apply fertilizer, avoiding high nitrogen fertilizers. Continue fertilizing about every 3 to 4 weeks until frost. As plants grow, trim the lower leaves from the bottom 12 inches of the stem.





Harvesting

Leave tomatoes on the vine for as long as possible for the sweetest fruits. Harvest them when they are firm, very red (or their mature color, depending on the variety), and require little effort to pull from the plant.

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