

Tips for growing tomatoes

By Melinda Myers

Nothing beats the flavor of fresh-from-the-garden tomatoes. Make this your biggest and tastiest tomato harvest yet with proper planting and care.

Reduce pest problems and increase the harvest by growing tomatoes in a sunny location with well-drained soil or in a quality potting mix for container gardens. Improve your garden soil by adding several inches of organic matter to the top 8 to 12 inches of soil prior to planting. Compost, aged manure, and other organic materials help improve drainage in heavy clay soil and increase the water holding ability of sandy soil.

Add a slow release organic nitrogen fertilizer according to label directions at planting. Slow release fertilizers provide a constant diet that is better for your plants and less work for you. Save yourself more time by mixing the fertilizer into the soil when incorporating the organic matter. Then give your plants a midseason boost as needed.

Once the soil is prepared, wait for the air and soil to warm to plant your tomatoes. Planting too early when the soil is still cool and the nights are chilly can stress the plant and delay your harvest.



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Photo/Melinda Myers LLC

Plant your tomatoes slightly deeper or in a trench for better rooting. Trench tomatoes by digging a shallow trench about 3 to 4 inches deep. Remove the lower leaves and lay the plant on its side in the hole. Roots will eventually form along the stem. Carefully bend the stem, so the upper leaves will be above the soil. Fill the trench with soil and water.

Stake or tower your tomatoes to reduce insect and disease problems and make harvesting easier. The type of tomato and your schedule will help determine the training system that works best for you.

Determinate tomatoes (look for the D on the tag) grow a certain height and stop. They work well in towers, containers or even hanging baskets. Indeterminate tomatoes, labeled with an I, keep growing taller, producing more flowers and fruit until the end of the growing season. These do best when grown on tall sturdy stakes or extra tall strong towers.

Towering tomatoes is easy. Simply place the tower over the tomatoes at planting. Tomatoes grown in towers produce a larger, but later harvest than staked tomato plants.

Allow a bit more time if you decide to stake your plants. Place the stake in the ground at planting. Be careful not to injure the roots. As the plants begin to grow prune off all side branches, suckers, that develop between the main stem and leaves. Loosely tie the remaining one or two stems to the stake. Cloth strips, twine or other soft ties work well. Keep tying up the plants as they continue to grow. Staked tomatoes produce the earliest and smallest harvest.

Check new plantings every few days and water often enough to

keep the developing root system moist. Reduce frequency as plants become established. Water established plants thoroughly whenever the top few inches of soil are slightly moist. Mulch the soil with evergreen needles, shredded leaves or other organic mulch to keep the soil consistently moist and suppress weeds. Consistent soil moisture encourages more flowering and fruiting, while reducing the risk of blossom end rot, cracking and misshapen fruit.

Harvest your tomatoes when fully colored. Leave them on the plant an extra 5 or 6 days for even better flavor. Unfortunately, the animals often move in and feast on the ripening fruit. In this case, you may need to finish ripening tomatoes indoors.

And once you taste that first red ripe tomato, you'll be looking for more sunny spots for containers or to expand your garden.

Gardening expert, TV/radio host, author and columnist Melinda Myers has more than 30 years of horticulture experience and has written more 20 gardening books, including "Can't Miss Small Space Gardening" and the "Midwest Gardener's Handbook".