

A Gardener's Primer Tomato Growing From Seed to Harvest!

MY WHAT LOVELY TOMATOES YOU HAVE!

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INTRODUCTION



I'm a vegetable gardener. Just thinking about it releases the stress of a day at work...slows the pulse. It is therapy for me.

Now, don't get me wrong. I appreciate flowers, too. In fact I use them to help with my vegetables as they attract bees for pollination. It's vegetables that really do it for me. And of all the vegetables you'll find in most gardens I believe it's the tomato that is cherished most.

They can be one of the toughest labors of love. No sense then in making things any more difficult than they need to be. Right? I'm one of those people that tend to initially over analyze things and as a result, end up picking the most difficult, labor-intensive way of doing something, including growing tomatoes.

Over the years I've learned how to work less and get more out of my garden. Heck, I work a regular job like everyone else and have only so much extra time, so why not make things easier and more productive?

Are you ready to learn from my mistakes? The time has already been invested. Why make my mistakes over again? Let's start growing more tomatoes with less time, effort and money!!!

DETERMINATE OR INDETERMINATE?



Does it really matter what type you use if in the end you get tasty tomatoes? For me it does.

Indeterminate tomatoes are rambling vines with a main stem that continues to grow until killed by disease or frost. If left un-pruned they will grow and grow, sprawling over a large area. They tend to yield consistently over a longer period of time. Ongoing pruning is required to keep things under control.

Determinate varieties, also known as bush tomatoes are more compact, bushy plants. The number of stems and foliage is basically predetermined. Determinate fruits (that's right, tomatoes are fruits, not vegetables) tend to ripen over a shorter period of time and eventually run out of gas. Believe me, you'll get plenty of tomatoes, just not as many or as long as with indeterminate.

For me determinates win hands down. Why? Because less work is more. Determinate tomatoes require minimal pruning. They're more compact so take less space, easier to stake or cage, easier to harvest and just more manageable. Indeterminate varieties simply require more work, as they require on-going, vigilant pruning.

Pruning a determinate tomato simply involves removing all leaves below the first flower cluster. If you do any pruning above the first flower cluster you'll only be pinching away potential fruit. Prune early as it encourages strong stem growth and helps to avoid soil-borne diseases splashing up onto the leaves. Never handle plants when the leaves are wet as it can encourage the spread of disease.

Pruning of indeterminate tomatoes is far more labor-intensive. Unlike determinates, this variety does not have a predetermined number of stems, leaves and flowers. Left alone a healthy indeterminate will grow more and more stems that can easily cover an area four feet wide by six feet long (as happened with one of my cherry tomato plants). By season's end you'll have an impenetrable mess that's long on disease and short on edible tomatoes.

My favorite determinate for eating is *Early Girl*. They produce lots of delicious, medium to large red beauties and mature in as few as 50-55 days! I'm a northern gardener and want my goods early and plentiful. This also spares plenty of time at season's end to clean up the garden and prepare for next year.

For paste tomatoes, I've used "Amish" or "Italian" varieties. These are semi-bush plants that combine the traits mentioned above. I just let them ramble un-caged and un-pruned. The results are several *5-gallon* buckets of joy from just four plants! There would be more with the extra work of pruning and fussing, but I get more than I need for canning and eating. Enough to share with my appreciative family and neighbors!

Chapter Summary:

Indeterminates...

- Are rambling vines that require staking or caging.
- Continue to grow an unlimited or indeterminate amount of new stems and foliage until the plant is killed by frost or disease.
- Require on-going pruning to keep the plant in check.

Determinates...

- Are compact, bushy plants with a fixed or predetermined number of stems and foliage.
- Require less space, are easier to cage and require minimal pruning.
- Pruning only requires removal of leaves below the first flower cluster.

SOIL PREPARATION: TWO EASY STEPS



My two easy steps make one big assumption. You have quality soil to start with. No need to get ultra-scientific. You build quality soil by mixing in plenty of organic material. This might be the bagged cow manure you pay for to whatever you can get for free. Free soil builders come in the form of compost you produce from kitchen, garden and yard wastes. Books hundreds of pages long have been written on the detailed science of composting so I'm going to keep things relatively simple here.

From your own yard you can collect piles of grass clippings (not treated with chemical fertilizers or weed killers) and leaves.

From the kitchen you can use fruit and vegetable scraps, eggshells, coffee grounds, old bread or cereal and just about anything else you can think of EXCEPT animal by-products like meat scraps, bones, fat or animal waste from dogs and cats (meat-eaters).

There is good animal waste and you can often times get it for free. Look for people with horses in or around your area. Horse manure is a wonderful soil builder and horses produce a lot of it! Someone with horses is someone who likely needs to get rid of manure. If you're lucky they'll even have the equipment to load and deliver, all at no charge to you.

The same goes for folks raising cattle, chickens, sheep and pigs

Spreading piles of manure is hard work. But "free" makes up for a lot. Free and delivered is nearly priceless. Before you spread the manure, be sure it has composted for at least 6 months. Fresh manure is referred to as hot. In fact, if you turn it you will see steam rise off of it if the air is cool enough. Hot manure will burn, and kill, your plants. Once composted, the stuff truly is "black gold".

If fresh manure is what you get, apply it in the fall after harvest and work into the soil the following spring.

If you have to buy, you have a number of choices. As mentioned, my garden is 60'X70', so just a few bulk truckloads of manure does the job. Make sure whatever you're getting is composted (not hot) and screened. Screened because you won't want to deal with sticks, stones, plastic or much of anything else that will end up in your garden. Tell whomever you're buying from that you're using it to build your garden soil. Mushroom compost is also an excellent option.

If you're in the city or have a much smaller garden, bags of composted manure from local garden centers will do the trick.

OK, step 1 is done. You've worked in your manure. Do this every year. Three to four inches worth if possible. If not, work in whatever you can. The rule here is "more is better".

Step 2 involves heating the soil. Tomatoes like heat. No, tomatoes love hot, humid heat. Heating your soil where you plan to plant will really give your transplants a boost. You have choices.

I use black landscape fabric because: 1) It's black, which means it absorbs sunlight to heat the soil, 2) It breathes and allows water and air to pass through which has its obvious benefits.

Some seed and supply catalogues sell a red plastic with claims that it is specially developed for tomatoes. I can't tell you one way or the other because I haven't tried it.

Others I know use black plastic. I don't think it's a good idea because it can't breath meaning water and air won't penetrate. You also risk heat building up to a point where helpers in your soil like worms and other beneficial organisms are killed.

Look for landscape fabric on the Internet or at local nurseries and garden centers. Simply lay it over the length of the row you intend to plant. Hold it down around the edges with soil or rocks to keep it from blowing away. When you're ready to plant, just cut holes at the proper spacing and plant. Here are a couple extra benefits you'll enjoy. Landscape fabric will suppress weeds in your rows (less work) and serves as mulch, which will help to keep your soil from drying out as often (less hand watering).

Of course, it's not mandatory that you use any of these aids. You'll have to balance the trade-off between these tools and how much weeding you want to do. Choosing not to weed is choosing to have your tomatoes compete for important soil

nutrients. It's also choosing to create crowded conditions that can easily lead to disease.

Chapter Summary:

- Growing healthy plants depends on quality soil.
- Build you soil by mixing in aged manures or compost.
- Black landscape fabric helps to heat the soil while keeping weeds under control and soil more evenly moist.

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