



Tomatoes – Easy to Grow, Easy to Eat!

Tomatoes are the cornerstone of any home vegetable garden – even beginning gardeners can be successful in bringing their own harvest to the table where they can enjoy the intense flavor that comes from a tomato that was picked only two minutes ago! There is a seemingly infinite choice of varieties and whether you choose to buy your transplants or start your own plants from seed, tomatoes will reward your efforts with taste, abundance and colorful beauty.

Tomato Talk: Learning the Lingo

Before diving into cultivation tips, it's good to know a bit of tomato lore. Here's a primer:

- *Three basic types of fruit:* Slicing/All-Purpose Tomatoes, including the huge beefsteak types; Plum/Paste Tomatoes for sauces and canning; and Cherry/Pear/ Grape/Currant Tomatoes for salads and snacking.
- *Three season designations:* Early-Season = ready to harvest at 55 to 65 days; Midseason = ready to harvest at 66 to 79 days; and Late-Season = ready to harvest at 80 days or more. Days to maturity are from transplanting, so add 6 to 8 weeks (42 to 56 days) if you are starting from seed.
- *Two choices for harvest:* Determinate varieties, often called bush varieties, will set their fruit all at the same time which is helpful when canning, sauce-making, or freezing; Indeterminate varieties continue to grow upwards and produce fruit throughout the season right until the first frost. Shorter, stockier determinates are amenable to container growing or where space is at a premium, while indeterminates offer a choice of many more varieties

Starting Your Tomatoes at Home

From February 18th to March 4th is the optimum time for starting tomatoes in St. Louis (6 to 8 weeks before our average last frost date, April 15th). Fill small containers or peat pots with seed-starting mix and moisten well. Seeds will benefit if you soak them in warm water overnight before sowing. Sow only 2 to 3 seeds in each container, about 1/8" deep, covering with a thin layer of vermiculite or seed-starting mix. Tomato seeds don't need light to germinate but they need to be kept warm – about 75° – or their germination will be slow. Bottom heat is best – use a heat mat or place on a radiator or near a heat vent. Cover your containers/peat pots loosely with plastic wrap to contain the humidity and keep the soil mix lightly moist to ensure germination. Under optimal conditions you'll have seedlings in about 6 to 8 days. Remove the plastic wrap and give your plants good strong light. Provide a space with a southern exposure or better yet, set a grow light at about 2" directly above the seedlings for 12 to 16 hours of light each day. A timer can be helpful. Now your plants can take it cooler – 65° during the day and 55° at night – a basement area is perfect for this. Raise the lights as the plants grow and don't allow the soil to dry out. Use warm water to gently water the seedlings. When the plants have their first set of true leaves, thin to one plant per pot and begin to fertilize – we recommend *Espoma Tomato! 1-3-1* every 10 to 14 days. It may be necessary to "pot up" your seedlings to give them space to grow. Set the seedlings deeper than they were before – bury them all the way up to their first set of true leaves – so that new roots will form on the buried stems. Firm the soil around the stem to keep them upright. Keep the lights 2" from the top of the plants.

Preparing Your Tomato Bed

Optimally you will have chosen a spot for your tomatoes and prepped it in the fall, but if it is not too wet you could still prepare your site in the spring before it is time to set out your transplants. Tomatoes must have full-sun: a minimum of 6 to 8 hours total. Choose a well-drained site with sufficient space – from 1 to 3 square feet – for each plant (placement will vary, depending on your chosen support system). Consider constructing raised beds which will improve drainage and allow the soil to warm up more quickly in spring. Thoroughly work the top 8”-10” of soil, adding *Dr. Earth Home Grown Vegetable Garden Compost* to loosen and enrich the soil and the soil conditioner *Turface* to improve water and nutrient uptake.

Time to Transplant

From around April 29th to May 6th, which is about 2 weeks after our last frost date, it is time to set out your transplants. Before you do this, though, your plants need time outside to harden off. Set them out on the back porch or patio for a few hours each day for about a week, bringing them in at night and gradually extending the time that they are out in the wind and sun. Then dig a nice deep hole – or a trench if you have several plants – and scratch two tablespoons per plant of *Espoma Tomato-tone 3-4-6* into the bottom. Set the transplants deep into the soil so that everything but the top two sets of leaves will be buried. Pack the soil firmly around the young plant making sure there are no air pockets. Staking or caging should be done at this time. Make sure the roots do not dry out during the transplanting process – a cloudy or drizzly day or in the late afternoon is ideal. Water them in with compost tea, liquid seaweed, or *Nature’s Source 10-4-3*. Monitor them for the first few weeks to make sure their roots won’t dry out as they establish.

Maintaining Your Tomatoes

To encourage a strong root system, water deeply once a week at the base of the plant or use soaker hoses. Avoid overhead sprinklers to keep foliage dry and disease free. Irregular watering practices may invite cracking or blossom end rot. Deep watering is more beneficial than lots of short sprinklings. Some afternoon wilting will occur in the blazing heat of summer but this is not a water issue – they will usually bounce back when the sun sets. To help retain moisture and reduce weeds, maintain 2”-3” of compost or grass clippings as a mulch around each plant as soon as they have been staked. If you are growing an indeterminate variety, you may choose to pinch off some of the suckers – the small leaves which grow in the joints of the main stem – so you won’t be overwhelmed by a tangle of growth and staking won’t become an overwhelming task. Determinate varieties should *not* be suckered. If desired, fertilize twice a month, either by top-dressing with *Espoma Tomato-tone 3-4-6*, or by a foliar feed/soil drench of *Nature’s Source 10-4-3*.

Problem-Solving

There are fungal, bacterial and viral diseases as well as a variety of worms, aphids and other insects that affect tomatoes, but with good gardening practices, you’ll avoid most of them and grow huge tomatoes. Establish good cultural and sanitation practices such as proper soil preparation, adequate spacing, consistent deep watering, and appropriate fertilizing. Maintain an organic disease control program if you’ve encountered problems in previous seasons. Scout often for problems since early detection and removal of diseased leaves and insects is the best way to ensure great tomatoes. Rotate crops yearly to help minimize diseases caused by soil-borne pathogens.

Come In and Choose...

Bowood Farms is your source for both seeds and transplants: each year we select tomato varieties for our vegetable program ranging from open-pollinated heirlooms to the best of the new hybrids. We have classes and workshops for all aspects of gardening and are always happy to chat with you about your garden plans!