

Growing Tomatoes

“The earliest reference to tomatoes being grown in North America is from 1710, when herbalist, William Salmon reported seeing them in what is today South Carolina.” Today there are around 7500 varieties of tomatoes grown for various purposes. Tomatoes are a great hospitality plant, usually out producing the need of the grower and leaving the grower to share their bountiful crop

General Information:

Tomato plants can be planted from mid-March onward, when frost is expected, protect plants from frost by covering with fabric (not plastic) overnight, and remove in the morning.

Tomatoes are warm-season plants that grow best at temperatures of 70 degrees and 90 degrees and require size to eight hours of sunlight.

Choose a sunny location that receives at least eight hours of sunlight each day.

Soil Requirements & Fertilizing:

Tomatoes prefer soil that is well-drained and amended heavily with organic matter. You can achieve this by adding 2 - 3 shovels of Mushroom Compost to the existing soil per plant (one bag will do three plants), if you are planting in clay soil use Claybuster (Claybuster contains a slow release fertilizer, gypsum, mushroom compost and pine bark) Mix Mushroom Compost and/or Claybuster with existing soil well in a 2 ft x 2 ft hole. Mushroom and Claybuster aids in creating good drainage.

Tomatoes require a soil with a pH in the range of 6.2 to 6.8. The pH is the general measurement of acidity in the soil. Soil testing through your local county extension office is the best way to determine the pH. If the pH of the soil is too low, add dolomitic limestone according

to the soil recommendations. In the absence of a soil test, apply lime at the rate of 5 pounds per 100 square feet of area. Add lime several months before planting to allow time for it to react with the soil. Till or spade the lime into the soil.

Dolomitic limestone also provides calcium and magnesium, which are important elements for the growth and health of the plants. If the pH test comes back normal, but the calcium level is low, apply gypsum at the rate of 1 pound per 100 square feet.

Tomatoes require a continuous supply of nutrients but too much Nitrogen produces a lot of plant growth and few blooms. Phosphorus is needed for good bloom and fruit set. Add a cup full of bone meal for phosphorous.

At planting time mix a handful of Gypsum in the hole with the Mushroom Compost and existing soil. Gypsum will add Calcium which aids in preventing blossom end rot (Gypsum can also be applied at the rate of 1 lb per 100 sq ft.).

When the plant begins to bloom, fertilize with a low Nitrogen natural fish fertilizer such as Neptune's fish emulsion (2-4-1) or Hi-Yield Tomato and Vegetable (4-10-6) fertilizer every three to four weeks. If you choose to use a liquid soluble fertilizer solution be careful not to apply too much or too frequently as this can lead to excess nitrogen (which will cause vigorous shoot growth but few blooms or fruit).

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Planting:

Tomatoes can develop roots all along their stems so plant them deeply to encourage a strong root system. Set the transplants down to the first set of true leaves near the soil surface. Firm the soil around the plants to force out any air pockets. Water in well using root stimulator (3.5 tablespoons per gal. of water) then continue with regular watering schedule.

If plants are to be staked or trellised, space them 24 inches apart in rows 4 - 6 feet apart. Although it requires more work initially, staking makes caring for tomatoes easier and keeps the plant's leaves from contacting the ground and possibly introducing disease. This in turn produces higher quality fruit.

Staking:

Staking can be done using tomato cages or by using 6 ft tall by 1 ft square wooden stakes. Heavy twine or strips of cloth can be used to tie the plants to the stake about every 10 inches vertically as the plants grow. Tomatoes can also be supported by training them to trellises or using a weaving system of cord and stakes.

Mulching:

Tomatoes also benefit from mulching. Mulching should be done soon after transplanting. Apply hardwood mulch to a depth of 2 to 3 inches. Newspaper can also be used as an ef-

fective mulch. Lay the newspaper about three sheets thick around plants to act as a weed barrier and to conserve moisture. Then place mulch on top of the paper.

Watering:

Tomatoes need about 1 to 2 inches of water per week depending on the type of soil they are growing in. If rainfall does not provide this quantity, water plants thoroughly once or twice per week. One or two heavy soakings are better than many light sprinklings. Consider using drip irrigation or soaker hoses around your plants. These methods will help conserve moisture and avoid getting the foliage wet which can cause disease. Hoses can be laid near each plant above the soil but under the mulch layer.

Harvesting and Handling:

For best quality harvest tomatoes when they are fully ripened on the vine. Tomatoes can also be harvested after they reach their mature green stage. When they have developed to their full size and show signs of starting to ripen.

Never put unripened tomatoes in the refrigerator. Fully ripened tomatoes may be placed in the refrigerator to prolong keeping. Tomatoes can last several weeks under refrigeration.