TOMATO DIRT CRASH COURSE

10 MUST-KNOW TOMATO GROWING TIPS

... for the best, tastiest, most successful tomato crop possible

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www.tomatodirt.com
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Tomatoes are the most popular home grown crop. And with good reason!

Fresh-grown tomatoes taste so much better than any tomato you’ll buy at the grocery store.

Not to mention growing your own tomatoes is cheaper than buying them. Purchased tomatoes have become quite expensive. But when you grow them in the home garden or in a container, you get more, better-tasting tomatoes for much less.

Tomatoes are also incredibly good for you, providing significant daily amounts of vitamins A, C, and K. Along with being heart-healthy, they offer powerful antioxidant protection and are an excellent source of fiber.

Are tomatoes truly easy to grow?

Experienced gardeners say yes. There are some basic principles to follow to make sure you have a successful crop. Plus, there are some definite pitfalls to avoid if you want to produce large numbers of high-quality tomatoes.

All of these tips are contained in this special report.
Your tomato plants will not just survive – they will thrive

If you’ve never grown tomatoes before, these tips will help you get off to an excellent start. Consider it a crash course in growing tomatoes!

If you’ve grown tomatoes in the past, use these tips to capitalize on your experience and produce even better, juicier, more flavorful, picture-perfect tomatoes this time around.

By following these steps, your tomato plants will not just survive, but thrive. Your tomatoes will be better, bigger, and tastier.

Once you’re successful at growing tomatoes, we predict that you’ll be captivated thereafter.

That’s why we at Tomato Dirt have prepared this special report for you. Take these steps. Track your success. And let us know how your tomato crop performs.

Happy Gardening!
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Tip #1: Buy plants (at first)

Starting tomatoes from seeds is not hard. But beginning gardeners can eliminate some variables by purchasing plants, rather than starting their own. Even if you’ve grown tomatoes before, you’ll get a strong start to your tomato crop by buying at least a few tomato plants while growing some additional ones by seed.

Buy tomato seedlings from a reputable garden center or discount home improvement store.

- Select dark green plants (rather than those with a yellow tinge, which could indicate a nutrient deficiency).
- Look for seedlings with a strong center stem, which will allow the plant to sustain the shock of transplantation well.
- Choose plants with few to no flowers or fruit – blossoming plants in small starter containers can indicate over-fertilization during the seedling stage.
- Check to make sure the plant isn’t infested with pests or disease by examining the undersides and edges of leaves for curling, discoloration, or holes.
Tip #2: Choose hybrid varieties (at first)

There are thousands of tomato varieties from which you can choose. How do you know which ones to grow?

**Best advice:** start with proven winners. Select tomato varieties that are hardy and withstand disease. Most often, that is a hybrid tomato.

**Hybrid tomatoes** are a cross between two genetically different tomato varieties. Breeding has been controlled for specific purposes, most often for disease resistance. With a hybrid, you get the best qualities of both parents.

**Heirloom tomatoes,** or “open pollinated” (OP) tomatoes, are varieties that have been reproduced for generations. While heirlooms have a reputation for better taste, hybrids are known to produce higher yields, uniformity, better fruit quality, and of course a stronger resistance to diseases.

You can identify a hybrid by its label. Look for a plant marked “Hybrid” or with an “F1” designation. Labels may also provide a list of letters following the plant name (VFNTA, for example), which tell you which diseases a hybrid can withstand. These letters indicate resistance to the following diseases:

- V verticillium wilt
- F fusarium
- N root nematodes
- T tobacco mosaic virus
- A alternaria stem canker
For the highest disease-resistance, choose a hybrid with the most letters after its name.

Variety is the spice of life. It certainly adds pizzazz to your tomato garden! Unless your space is extremely limited (that is, just one container on your patio), try more than one variety of tomato plant. If you have room, try a couple of different varieties to find out how they perform in your garden. For example, you may wish to grow beefsteak tomatoes for sandwiches, roma tomatoes to make sauce, and cherry tomatoes to use in salads or for snacking.

You can go so far as to find out what kinds of varieties grow particularly well in your region and select those to grow. Ask garden center employees or a gardening neighbor for information to help you make a good choice.
Tip #3: Choose the right place

**Convenience.** Select a planting location that’s convenient for you. This way, it will be easy for you to check on your tomatoes each day – or at least regularly. If you plant tomatoes in an area too far from your house or out of the way of your regular traffic patterns, you may forget about them or bothered by monitoring them. Frequent checking means you’ll know if they need watering, staking, or pest control. You’ll also be able to pick tomatoes just as they ripen rather than allowing them to shrivel or rot on the vine (which can happen if they are left on their own at the height of the hot summer season.)

**Sun.** Choose a location that gets 6-8 hours of sun a day. Tomatoes need light to flourish!

**Space.** A tomato plant doesn’t take much room. You can grow one in the corner of a flower bed or even in a container on your balcony or porch. Or, if you have a vegetable garden, you can plant an entire row of them. You can mix them among shrubs and flowers in a perennial border. Tuck one in between foundation plantings.
Tip #4: Prepare the soil

Once you’ve picked the perfect spot for planting tomatoes, spend some time preparing your soil. The dirt is to be their home. You can help make it as welcoming as possible.

Dig in the dirt. Begin preparing your soil by cultivating the bed 8-10 inches deep. Remove debris. Break up soil clods. Work in 2-3 inches of compost or other organic matter into the top 6 inches. This is an especially important step in preparing your soil for planting tomatoes whether you have rich, black loam or terrible dirt. If you’re growing tomatoes in containers, use a good potting mix. Add compost to enrich the potting soil further. Avoid filling containers with garden soil. When diseases and pests in regular garden soil are transferred to a contained area, it’s much harder to control them.

Warm the soil. Tomatoes like warm soil. Even when air temperatures heat up in the spring, it takes the dirt awhile to catch up. You can help prevent transplant shock by covering your tomato plot with sheets of black plastic, which absorbs heat from the sun and accelerates the warming process.

Test the soil. Check the nutrient and chemical contents of your garden soil by testing it. Then you’ll know whether or not you need to amend it. Purchase an inexpensive soil test kit online or at a garden center. Or contact your local extension office and ask about local soil testing services. When soil test results come in, look for a slightly acidic pH – between 6.5 and 7.0. (To lower pH, work in sulfur to the soil. To raise pH, work in lime to the soil.) Check to see if there’s an even balance between the soil’s nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium levels. All three nutrients are essential to growing healthy tomatoes. Add those nutrients which are deficient.
**Tip #5: Plant at the right time**

**Date.** Check your local extension or a region map for recommended planting dates. Tomatoes do best when planted about 10-14 days after the last frost date. By then, the soil has warmed a bit.

**Temperatures.** Make sure it’s consistently warm both day and night. (Tomatoes don’t like to be cold.)

**Weather.** The perfect planting day is cloudy or overcast. If you must plant when it’s sunny, do it early or later in the day so that seedlings aren’t as stressed by the strong light. Or provide shade with a folding chair until the heat of the day has passed.

**Readiness.** Plant your tomatoes at a time when you’re able to monitor them carefully for a week or two afterwards. The first 7-10 days in the ground are especially important. Check and water them daily until they are established and can get on a regular watering schedule (see Tip #7: Watering Consistently below). Look for signs of wilt, critters, and diseases so you can treat them immediately and help plants get off to a good start.
Tip #6: Stake for success

Should you stake your tomato plants? It depends. There are at least two questions to consider:

1. What tomato variety are you growing?
2. What size crop do you wish to harvest?

**Variety.** When you select a tomato variety, take the time to learn a little about it. If it will reach a maximum height of 30 inches, you may want to consider not staking it. Many bush and dwarf varieties mature at 3 feet or less and require little support.

**Production.** Plant support allows more light to reach branches, leading to more blossoms, which in turn produce more fruit. Varieties that grow 30 inches or more need staking or caging in order to maximize the number of tomatoes produced. You needn’t stake these tomatoes if you’re not concerned with harvesting the largest number of tomatoes possible.

If you choose to stake your plants, you can try different methods of support including pre-made cages, wire-rolled cages, wood or metal stakes with ties, tomato trellises, and tomato spirals. Cages and spirals are most expensive but easiest to use – you simply insert them in the ground over the newly-planted seedling, which will grow up inside the cage. If you choose wooden or metal stakes you’ll need to spend time tying branches to the stake for support as plants mature. Tomato trellises take a bit of set up time but thereafter require much less care. Experiment and find a staking method that fits your garden and your budget.
Tip #7: Water consistently

When it comes to growing tomatoes, you need to know two things about watering them.

1. Tomatoes need 1-3 inches of water a week, depending on temperatures.
2. Tomatoes need consistent watering (rather than daily or sporadic watering).

Once plants are established, do your crop and yourself a favor by establishing a consistent watering schedule.

Regular watering not only helps plants thrive, but also helps prevent many tomato diseases, cracking, and blossom-end rot. It’s not hard. It just takes a little bit of planning and an eye on the weather radar each week.

You can also help your growing tomatoes maintain a healthy moisture balance when you apply mulch 3-5 weeks after planting (and no earlier).

It’s simpler to understand watering tomatoes when you think about when, where and how to do it.

1. WHEN

Water regularly. Consistent watering produces stronger plants and larger fruit. In the height of summer, water 2-3 times a week. (Rainfall counts.) Later when temperatures cool, scale back to once a week.
2. WHERE

Water at the soil line. You’ll help build your tomato’s root system. Avoid overhead watering, which spreads diseases.

3. HOW

Water slowly. Let water sink into the ground to help plants develop strong root systems. When the soil surrounding your tomato plant is moistened 6-8” deep, you’ll know you’ve done your job well.
A tomato plant starts in the spring as a tiny seed. During the season, it produces an abundant crop of fruit. By frost it can be several feet tall with dozens of branches. That kind of growth over an extended period requires lots of energy. That’s why tomatoes are known as “heavy feeders.” Fertilize tomatoes according to their stage of growth.

1. **Before planting.** A few weeks before setting plants in the garden, prepare the soil for tomatoes by working in compost into the soil (see Tip #4: Preparing the Soil, above).

2. **When planting.** After digging holes or trenches for tomato plants, add a handful of fertilizer and work it into the soil to give your plant a strong start.

3. **During the season.** Once fruit “sets” (first tomatoes develop from blossoms into small golf-size globes), feed plants by working in 2-3 tablespoons of fertilizer around the base of the plant every 3-4 weeks.
Tip #9: Check for diseases and pests

Tomatoes are on the receiving end of their fair share of diseases and pests. The good news is that most tomato problems are treatable.

Tomato problems stem from three sources: disease, pests, or conditions. With careful checking, you can identify when your plants may be headed for trouble and take steps to reverse it.

Examine your plants regularly (preferably each day). Study the leaves, stems, blossoms, and fruit. Look for these telltale problem signs:

- Soft stems, especially at the root (can indicate tomato root rot)
- Holes in stems, leaves, or fruit; stripped foliage (indicates pest infestation)
- Streaks, spots, or patches on stems and leaves (can indicate fungus or other disease)
- Curling leaves, wilting foliage (can indicate disease or dry soil)
- Soft or dark spots on fruit (can indicate pest infestation, soil deficiency)
- Yellowing foliage (can indicate a soil deficiency, wilt, other disease, or pest infestation)

Most diseases are treatable with fungicide. Pests can be treated with insecticide. Soil deficiencies can be corrected with amendments.

Here are most common tomato problems and how to treat them. (For more detailed information, see www.tomatodirt.com.)
**Diseases**

**Tomato blight.** Early blight shows itself in brown spots on lower leaves, which eventually turn yellow and fall. Late blight affects tomatoes later in the season. Blue-gray or brown spots develop on leaves. Both are caused by fungi. For both early and late blight, immediately apply a fungicide recommended for your area or a bio-fungicide such as Serenade.

**Leaf spot.** Differentiate different kinds of leaf spot by their color. Gray Leaf Spot starts with small, dark spots that appear on both sides of a leaf’s surface, and as they enlarge they turn grayer. Surrounding leaf area will yellow. Warm, wet conditions aggravate Gray Leaf Spot. Septoria Leaf Spot, on the other hand, shows itself in papery-like spots on leaves which develop tiny dark specks. You can slow or halt symptoms with a copper-based fungicide or a bio-fungicide.

**Fusarium wilt.** Look for yellowing leaves that droop downward, caused by a tomato fungus. Some plants will respond to copper sprays or a bio-fungicide. The best treatment for fusarium wilt is prevention: rotate crops and grow hybrid tomato varieties that are resistant.

**Verticillium Wilt.** If your plants wilt during the hottest part of the day and recover at night, verticillium wilt may be the culprit. It’s caused by a fungus. Rotate your crops and choose hybrid, wilt-resistant varieties.

**Pests**

**Aphids.** These little insects suck sap. They feast on leaves and stems all season long, which weaken plants and allow disease to spread. Control them by applying insecticidal soap or insecticide.
**Tomato cutworm.** These critters adore new tomato seedlings. They chew away at stems and leaves. To prevent the loss of your crop, wrap the stems of newly-planted seedlings with paper or place two sticks (about the size of popsicle sticks) on either side of your stems to deter cut worms.

**Tomato hornworm.** Green caterpillars with white stripes and a black “horn” on their backs eat leaves and tomatoes. Handpick hornworms and squash them or drop them in soapy water to dispose.

**Tomato fruitworm.** Look for a small hole in the tomato. That’s a sign that fruitworm larvae are feasting on your crop. If you find these green- or brown-striped caterpillars on your plants, spray with an approved insecticide and destroy infected fruit.

**Slugs.** When un-staked tomatoes flop on the ground, slugs are happy – they get easy access to leaves for munching. Staking is a good deterrent. You can also sprinkle Epsom salts where slugs creep to bid them good bye. Or capture slugs with slug traps.

**Whiteflies.** Tiny insects fly among vegetable plants, including tomatoes, and suck plants’ sap, which causes leaves to yellow and plants to weaken. You can recognize whiteflies by their sticky, telltale secretion (“honeydew”) which often leads to black mold. Treat with an approved insecticide.

**Conditions**

**Root rot.** Poor watering and drainage allow fungi to rot stems of plants, leaving them soft and mushy. Plants rarely survive. Take preventative steps by preparing your soil well, resist over-watering, and mulch plants only after they’ve been established – about 3-5 weeks after planting.
**Blossom-end rot.** Black or brown, sunken water spot on the blossom end of the tomato, caused by inconsistent watering – the tomato is unable to maintain a consistent uptake of calcium. Apply calcium directly to leaves and water consistently to correct the problem. Blossom-end rot often resolves itself as the season progresses, especially with a consistent watering schedule.

**Cracks.** Tomatoes crack when watering has been inconsistent, particularly when a dry spell (with no watering) is followed by heavy rain. Cracks can be concentric (encircling the tomato) or radial (extending out from the tomato stem). Prevent cracking with a consistent watering plan.
Tip #10: Enjoy your crop!

You’ll start picking tomatoes about 60-85 days after planting seedlings in the garden. Early varieties, obviously, ripen earlier than mid-season varieties. Harvesting continues until frost.

**Determinate tomatoes** set and ripen their fruit all at one time, usually within two weeks. Be ready for a large harvest – its a good time for canning tomatoes, freezing tomatoes, making homemade tomato sauce, canning tomato juice, or giving some tomatoes away to family and friends. **Indeterminate varieties** ripen all season long. You can help them to set fruit earlier by pinching off the tips of the main stems in early summer.

**You know a tomato is ripe when** –

- It has turned red on the vine (or yellow for yellow tomatoes, pink for pink varieties, and so forth).
- Its color is even. In other words, ripe red tomatoes don’t have one side that’s green. The entire tomato has color. (There are exceptions – see “special harvesting situations” below.)
- It is just a tiny bit soft when squeezed. Some gardeners say “in between firm and soft.”

To pick a tomato, grasp it gently and firmly. Twist it until it snaps off the vine. You can also use a clippers or knife to harvest tomatoes. Cut the stem close to the fruit.

At the end of the season when the forecast indicates a frost is on the way, it’s time to pick your remaining tomatoes – even if they’re still green. Bring them in to ripen on the counter, windowsill, or on a cool shelf in the
basement or garage lined with newspaper. Ripen a tomato quickly when you place it in a brown paper bag with another piece of fruit, such as a banana.

You can also harvest an entire branch of un-ripened tomatoes and hang it inside upside down in your basement or garage, where it will ripen gradually. If you’re careful with your late-season crop, you can enjoy fresh tomatoes for several weeks after frost!

![Image of tomatoes](image)

Tomatoes are delicious in salads, soups, main courses, appetizers, and for snacking. You can freeze, dry, and can them. They are one of our most versatile foods. Growing tomatoes is a delicious and fun hobby.

Be sure to visit www.tomatodirt.com for more information and tips. Email us with your questions. Most of all, have fun growing tomatoes and using them. Happy Gardening!