

GROWING A GREAT TOMATO

Mother's Day is generally considered to be our area's frost-free date making it safe to plant tomatoes. If you want to try your luck and plant earlier, invest in some protective coverings like water walls which will help to heat up the soil and insulate the starts. Select a sunny location for your new plants. Tomatoes need at least 6 hours of direct sunlight a day. Have a shady yard? Try planting your tomato plant in a pot that can be placed in any sunny spot you can find.

Tomatoes have a deep root system so till the soil at least 18 inches down and mix in lots of organic material. Tomatoes like calcium and magnesium so mix in a fertilizer specifically for tomatoes like **Tomato Tone**. Continue feeding once a month. This easy step can help prevent problems like blossom end rot, increase fruit production and improve flavor!

Tomatoes are the only plant that can be buried up the stem. The bumpy nodes on the bottom of the stem will root and give your plant a better start which leads to a better established plant and eventually more fruit! Because of this height is not a factor when selecting a plant, but do look for a plant with a sturdy, pencil-like stem without fruit. Pinch off any flowers to encourage rooting first, and then fruit production.

Tomatoes require one inch of water a week. The easiest way to judge this is to get a rain gauge. Inconsistent and improper watering can stunt growth, cause disease problems and kill a young plant faster than most anything else.

Most varieties will need to be staked or caged. Space staked plants 18-24" apart and caged plants 30-36" apart. Use twist ties, clips or strips of nylon hose to help attach the tomato to its support.

Use a regular prevention program to reduce insect and disease problems. **Captain Jack's Dead Bug Brew** is a great organic spray that fights all caterpillars—including the dreaded cutworm; a Permethrin spray works best on spidermites. For disease problems we recommend organic **Serenade**. Alternating these products weekly will ensure a healthy and productive garden.

Day temperatures above 90 degrees, low humidity or poor bee pollination can keep tomatoes from setting fruit. A product called **Blossom Set** is an easy to use spray that increases flower production, sets fruit and can even increase fruit yields. That beautiful red color we love does not always develop when temps are above 86 degrees. Pick fruit when pink and let fruit ripen inside at the perfect 70 degrees.

SOME TOMATO LINGO.

Hybrid. Hybrids are varieties in which two parents are crossed together to make a new, better variety. Hybrids tend to be more reliable, heavier producers and more disease resistant.

Heirloom. An heirloom is an open-pollinated variety over 40 years old. Some heirlooms have been passed down through generations. They have wonderful flavor but are not as fool-proof.

Indeterminate. A tomato vine that grows taller and produces all summer.

Determinate. A tomato vine that grows to a certain size and stops; can also stop producing fruit.

The Mighty Mato (A grafted tomato). Two things have always been fairly constant in the tomato world: 1. Heirlooms had the best flavor, but poor performance. 2. Hybrids have excellent performance, but less flavor.

Well, until now! The Mighty Mato is a delicious, but less hardy, Heirloom variety grafted onto the root stock of a hardy, but less tasty, variety. The combination is a heavy producer that can better tolerate heat, drought and disease that tastes fabulous!



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