



HOW TO GROW TASTY TOMATOES

For the best results, test the pH (the degree of acidity or alkalinity) of your soil before planting. Tomatoes grow best in soil with a pH of 6 to 6.5. If your soil registers below 6, apply lime according to label directions a few months before planting. Also conduct a test to determine your soil's calcium content. Calcium is an essential nutrient for tomato development because it combats a condition called blossom end rot.

Tomatoes should be grown in an area that gets eight hours of full sun a day in well-drained, average soil. Tomatoes also do well in large containers. The minimum container size is a 5 gallon bucket, but ideally you should use one that's 7- to 8 gallons. Make sure the containers have drainage holes and use a high quality potting mix.

For sure-fire results, buy seedlings to transplant to the garden or container. Tomato seeds can also be sown directly in the soil. Follow the seed packet instructions. These include Better Boy, Sungold, Celebrity, Beefmaster, Mortgage Lifter and Sweet 100, but there are others.

Tomatoes will either be a determinate or indeterminate type (the label will indicate which one).

Determinate means the plants grow until they reach a certain size, producing tomatoes over a short period. These are more of the bush-type tomatoes, which are better for containers.

Indeterminate tomatoes grow quite tall and usually need some support. They produce over a long period.

Tomatoes are heavy feeders. Liquid fertilizers, such as fish emulsion, can also be used on tomato plants throughout the growing season. Always read and follow the label directions for the products you use.

Once tomatoes start developing fruit, it's important to keep the plants properly watered. Irregular watering contributes to calcium deficiencies and blossom end rot. Tomatoes, like most food crops, grow best with an inch of water every week, either from natural rainfall or supplemental sources. Drip irrigation systems are extremely efficient, as are soaker hoses, or you can hand water at the base of the plants. It's best to water deeply once or twice a week rather than shallowly every day. Because tomatoes are susceptible to many fungus diseases, keep water off the leaves (except natural rainfall, of course).

Apply mulch (straw works well) 1 to 2 inches thick in a ring around the base of tomato plants. The mulch conserves water and moderates soil temperatures. To prevent insect or disease invasions, do not let mulch touch the stems of plants.

Harvest tomatoes as they ripen. The more you harvest, the more tomatoes you'll get!

