

Starting Tomato Seeds: Tomato plants are usually started indoors. Planting tomato seeds is an exciting time. It is one of the very first gardening projects of the year. After a long winter, you are itching to get your hands back into some "dirt".

Begin starting tomato seeds indoors in small containers, eight to ten weeks before the last frost date for your area. Sow tomato seeds about 1/8" inch deep, using seed starting soil.

As soon as the seedlings emerge, they need full sunlight to grow sturdy. Lack of sunlight causes the plants to grow "leggy". Use grow lights to supplement the amount of available sunlight.

Tip: To help your plants grow sturdy, place a small fan on low nearby. Or, lightly brush the tops of the plants with your hands a couple times each day.

How to Grow Tomatoes: Growing tomatoes is easy. It's one reason for their popularity in your home garden. Just prior to planting them in your garden, "harden them off" by bringing them outside during the daytime and for increasing hours, until you are leaving them out overnight. Use of a coldframe is recommended, but not a requirement. If frost is predicted, bring them indoors.

On planting day, pour liberal amounts of water with a soluble liquid fertilizer on them. Plant them in the garden carefully. To minimize transplant shock, avoid disturbing the roots. Normal spacing is 24 " apart, in rows 30" to 36" apart.

Fertilize on a regular basis. Early applications should be high in nitrogen. As blossoming occurs, switch to fertilizers which are higher in Phosphorus and Potassium. Too much Nitrogen fertilizer results in lots of lush green leaves, and little fruit. A fertilizer specifically formulated for tomatoes, will help to maximize your crop.

Keep your tomato plant well watered. Deep watering is preferable, over more frequent, light watering. You want moisture to go deep to all the roots of the plant. Water directly to the roots. Keep water off the leaves if at all possible. Tomatoes are susceptible to plant disease that grows in wet, humid conditions.

Tip: Even if you have a garden out back, we recommend finding a place along the back of the house for just one tomato plant. This one plant will be the last to succumb to frost in the fall. The warmth of the house, and a light plastic sheet or cloth tossed over it at night, will allow you to harvest fresh tomatoes after the first frost, right when prices are rising in the grocery store.

Days to Maturity: Varying types require from 55 days to 85 days (Beefsteaks). The race is always on in my neighborhood to get the first ripe tomato of the season. Most of us also grow and await the beefsteaks. One slice from these delicious beauties more than fills a sandwich.

Cold and hot spells will affect fruit development and growth. Fruit set will not occur below 55 degrees or above 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Tomatoes like it hot! They will die if exposed to frost. Make sure to plant them after the last frost. Tomatoes store well in a cool, dry location. Do not put them in the refrigerator. While they last longer in the refrigerator, they will lose their flavor and texture. Keep them out of direct sunlight.

Just before frost, pick tomatoes while they are still green or orange. Wash them thoroughly. Rinse in a light solution of 1 gallon of water and a tablespoon of bleach. This kills off bacteria that rots the fruit. Allow them to dry, then put them in a cool, dry, dark place.

To ripen tomatoes indoors, bring a couple at a time to a warm, sunny window.