

Easy Gardening...Tomatoes

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Tomatoes are the most popular garden vegetable crop in Texas. They grow well in most Texas areas if planted in a well-drained soil. Tomato plants need at least 6 hours of sunlight each day.

Soil Preparation

Work the top 8-10 inches of soil several weeks before planting. Break up the large clods. Remove rocks and trash.

Tomatoes grow best in soils which have lots of organic matter. If possible, spread 2-3 inches of organic material over the planting area. You can use materials such as compost, leaves or rotted hay. Work it into the top 4-6 inches of soil. Work the garden soil only when it is dry enough not to stick to the garden tools.

Fertilizing

Add 2-3 pounds of fertilizer such as 10-10-10 for every 100 square feet of garden area. Spread the fertilizer evenly over the area. Mix it with the top 3-4 inches of soil.

If you plan to grow single plants, dig a hole 2 feet wide and 10 inches deep. Refill the hole with half soil and half organic matter. Mix 2 level tablespoons of fertilizer into this planting area.

Varieties

Small fruit

- Small Fry
- Red Cherry
- Presto
- Saladette

Large fruit

- Spring Giant
- Terrific
- Homestead
- Big Set
- Walter
- Bonus
- Sunmaster
- Merced
- Bingo
- Carnival
- Surefire

Planting

Most families need only a few plants. So it is best to buy plants, not grow them from seed. Buy healthy, green plants 6-8 inches tall. Do not set out tomato plants until all danger of frost has passed. Transplant fall tomatoes in the garden about 100 days before the first expected frost.

Make the transplant holes 3-4 inches deep, and 2-4 feet apart in the row. Space rows at least 3 feet apart for staked or caged plants. For unsupported plants, leave 4-5 feet between rows.

If possible, set out tomatoes on raised beds of soil about 6 inches high. See figure 1.

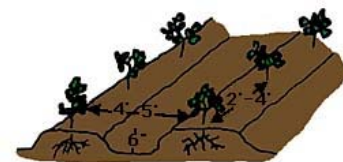


Fig. 1. Tomatoes grow best on beds raised to about 6 inches. Leave enough spacing between rows and plants. For bush varieties that will not be staked or caged, leave 2-4 feet between plants. Leave 4-5 feet between rows.

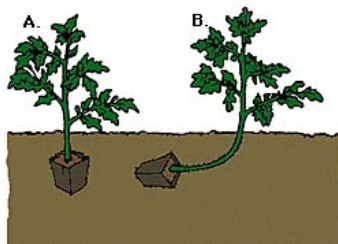


Fig. 2. Plant tomatoes slightly deeper than they were first growing (A). If plants are leaved, set them as shown (B).

Transplant tomatoes in the evening or on a cloudy day. This will keep the plants from wilting and getting too dry. Before planting, fill the transplant holes with water and let it soak in. Plant the transplant slightly deeper than it had been growing. See figure 2. Pack the soil loosely around the plant. Leave a slightly sunken area around each plant to hold water.

Watering

Water the tomato plants slowly and deeply to help grow a strong root system. Do not let tomatoes wilt severely, or yields and fruit quality will be low.

Care During the Season

Mulch the tomatoes for highest yields. Place a 2-3 inch layer of organic material such as compost, leaves or hay around the growing plants. Mulching helps stop weed growth and water loss from the soil.

You can let tomatoes grow on the ground, or support them by staking or caging. When staking tomatoes, put the stake in shortly after transplanting to lessen root damage. A 6-foot stake set 10 inches deep in the soil will work well. As the plant grows taller, tie it loosely to the stake every 12 inches with pieces of rag or twine. See figure 3.

Prune the staked tomatoes to produce a more orderly vine. Remove the small shoots which grow out of the point where each leaf joins the main stem. Remove the shoots by bending them sideways until they snap. See figure 4. For two main vines, remove all but the lowest shoot. It will develop into a second branch.



Fig. 4. Prune tomatoes by removing small side shoots or suckers as they grow.

Caging is another way to train tomato plants. You can make a good cage with a piece of concrete reinforcement wire 5 feet tall and 6 feet wide. Put cages over the young plants. Push the cages down into the soil to keep them from blowing over. This way, the vine has support without being tied. See figure 5. Tomatoes growing in cages do not need to be pruned.

When the first fruits are about 1 inch in size, scatter 1 level tablespoon of fertilizer around each plant. Scatter it about 6 inches from the stalks. Work it lightly into the soil. Water the plants after fertilizing. Fertilize them every 3-4 weeks with 1-2 level tablespoons of fertilizer.

If you need to control weeds, then cultivate or hoe around the plants. Work the soil only deep enough to kill the weeds. Do not hurt the tomato plant roots.



Fig. 3. Tomato plants should be tied loosely to support stakes.

Insects and Diseases

Several different insects and diseases bother tomatoes. Control these problems by using approved insecticides and fungicides. Ask your county Extension agent what to use to control tomato insects and diseases. Follow the directions on the container.

Harvesting

Pick tomatoes at full color for best quality. If you pick them when they are pink, let them ripen at room temperature. Store them in the refrigerator after they reach full color.

Serving

Tomatoes are a good source of Vitamin A and fair source of Vitamin C. Fresh tomatoes are popular in salads, on sandwiches and sliced. Tomatoes can be cooked and used in many different ways.

Storing

Fully ripe tomatoes can be stored in the refrigerator for several weeks.

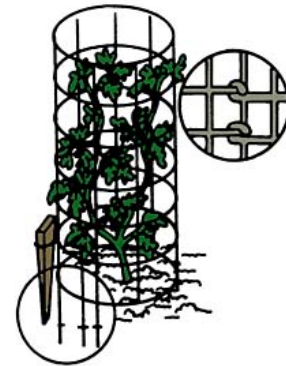


Fig. 5. Cages made from reinforcing wire give good support to tomato plants.

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