

# TOMATOES



**FIRST THINGS FIRST.** Your plants may arrive dry and thirsty. Give them a drink, watering until the pot turns dark brown. Keep plants in a bright spot protected from cold, and plant after the last frost. Follow planting directions on the pot label or see the video at [bonnieplants.com/growing/growing-tomatoes](http://bonnieplants.com/growing/growing-tomatoes).



## PLANTING

Tomatoes run on warmth. Plant in late spring or early summer, after all potential for the last frost has passed. In zone 10, tomatoes can be treated as a fall and winter crop as well.

**Find a sunny spot.** Tomatoes need at least 6-8 hours of sun to bring out their best flavors, and you will need to stake, trellis, or cage most varieties to keep them off the ground. Install your supports when you set out your plants. Space plants at the distance indicated on the stick tag in the pot.

**Prepare the soil.** Tomatoes need a constant supply of nutrients, and take them up best when the soil pH ranges from 6.2 to 6.8. Add at least 3 to 4 inches of compost to your beds or containers to help

hold moisture and contribute nutrients to the soil to be used as needed by the plants.

**Plant deeply—very deeply.** Plant so that two-thirds of the stem is buried. This allows roots to sprout along the buried stem, making your tomato plant stronger and better able to find water in drought. Note that tomatoes are the only vegetables that should be planted this way.

**Mulch well and water regularly.** Whether you're planting in the ground, raised beds or containers, cover the soil with 2 to 4 inches of mulch, straw, or shredded leaves to discourage weeds and keep the soil evenly moist – the key to preventing cracked fruits and blossom-end rot. Water regularly, aiming for an inch per week (more in hot weather). If desired,

use soaker hoses or drip irrigation to help maintain even soil moisture.

**Try growing in containers.** Tomatoes are easy to grow in a pot if you use a big container (18 to 24 inches in diameter). Fill it with premium quality potting mix and mix in some compost. Use a tomato cage in the pot for taller varieties, or a stake for smaller patio types. Be sure to plant deeply and keep the soil moist.

## FERTILIZING

Feed regularly with Bonnie Herb, Vegetable & Flower Plant Food to keep plants healthy and vigorous. Your plants will love the naturally based formula made from oilseed extract. Apply every 1 to 2 weeks, following the label directions.

By late summer, plants that began producing early in the season will show signs of exhaustion. Coax out new growth by pruning away withered leaves and branches. Then follow up with plant food and treatments for leaf diseases or insects, if needed.

## TROUBLESHOOTING

As summer heats up, some tomato plants have trouble setting fruit. Be patient, and you will start seeing little green tomatoes again when nights begin cooling down. Meanwhile, promptly harvest ripe tomatoes to relieve stressed plants of their burdens.

Humid weather creates ideal conditions for fungal diseases like early blight, which causes dark spots to form beginning on lower leaves. Late blight is a more devastating disease that kills plants quickly. Protect against it by spraying the leaves with an approved fungicide such as chlorothalonil (not organic) or copper (organic)—be sure to follow label directions—and keeping the garden clean of plant debris.

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## HOW TALL WILL THEY GROW?

**Determinate** (including bush) varieties reach a certain plant height, usually 3-5 feet, then stop growing. The majority of their fruit matures within a month or two. These are popular with gardeners who like to can or make sauce, or have another reason for wanting to harvest most of their tomatoes at once. Most need a short cage.

**Indeterminate** varieties continue to grow and produce tomatoes throughout the growing season. These vigorous plants need extra-tall supports (at least 5 feet). Because indeterminate varieties produce so many branches, gardeners often prune a few for optimum-sized fruit, or train each plant on a very tall trellis.

Look for the words "determinate" and "indeterminate" on your plant tags and in the variety descriptions on our website, [bonnieplants.com](http://bonnieplants.com).

## SYMBOLS FOR DISEASE RESISTANCE

Tomato variety names are often followed by capital letters that indicate resistance to certain diseases. Here's what they mean:

- V** – Verticillium Wilt
- F** – Fusarium Wilt
- N** – Nematodes
- ASC** – Alternaria Stem Canker
- TMV** – Tobacco Mosaic Virus
- St** – Stemphylium (gray leaf spot)
- TSWV** – Tomato Spotted Wilt Virus
- LB** – Late Blight

## RECIPES

Nothing beats a simple sandwich with fresh tomato slices, but we bet you'll have so many tomatoes to harvest that you'll need more ideas. Go to [bonnieplants.com/cooking](http://bonnieplants.com/cooking) to view a variety of recipes for your freshly harvested tomatoes, along with other veggies and herbs.



Of all crops, tomatoes are the most likely to get problems, but many hybrids have been developed that resist the worst or most prevalent diseases. Check the variety descriptions on our website for details on specific disease resistance.

Pests like hornworms eat tomato foliage and sometimes damage fruits. (One or two hornworms can strip a plant leafless.) Pick worms off or spray with DiPel®.

Sometimes a ripening tomato will get a black, sunken spot on its blossom end. This is not a disease but a frustrating condition called blossom-end rot, caused by a calcium deficiency. Help prevent it by increasing soil pH to 6.5 to 6.8, keeping soil consistently moist, and not over-fertilizing. If a plant has already been affected, use a calcium spray on the foliage.

## HARVEST & STORAGE

As tomatoes begin to ripen, their color changes from vibrant medium-green to a lighter shade, with faint pink or yellow stripes. These "breakers," or mature green tomatoes, can be chopped for salsa, pickled, or pan-fried into a crispy appetizer. Yet tomato flavors become much more complex as the fruits ripen, so you have good reason to wait. The exact signs of ripeness vary with variety, but in general, perfectly ripe tomatoes show deep color yet still feel firm when gently squeezed. Store harvested tomatoes at room temperature indoors, or in a shady place outside. Never refrigerate them, as temperatures below 55° cause the precious flavor compounds to break down. Bumper crops can be frozen, canned, or dried for future use.

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