

Tips for great tomatoes



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Question: Can you give me some tips for growing big, beautiful tomatoes?

Answer: There are many reasons for growing tomatoes in the home garden.

One is the very delicious fruit you'll enjoy when you finally pick your own. Another is the extraordinary choice of varieties available to the home gardener. But a third is the plant itself, the pretty yellow flowers and the aromatic scent of the leaves as your hands move through them in search of fruit.

Nothing drives Oregon vegetable gardeners to distraction like the elusive quest for a ripe crop of tomatoes. However, there is the fickle weather to consider, diseases to battle and insects to thwart.

Tomatoes have been cultivated so long that hundreds of cultivars have been developed. The fruit was originally cultivated by indigenous people of what is now Mexico. Following the European colonization of the Americas, tomatoes were taken to Europe and Asia and were in cultivation there by the end of the 16th century.

Since they are an important agricultural crop, breeding programs have produced many modern cultivars to add to the original heirloom varieties. Tomato cultivars can be categorized by their fruit characteristics, intended use and growth habits. For example, based on fruit characteristics and intended use, there are cherry tomatoes, paste tomatoes and slicers.

Selecting a cultivar for your garden depends on what type of tomato you want and how your climate and growing conditions influence ripening. Cherry tomatoes like Sun Gold, Gold Nugget and Sweet Million ripen early and are a good bet for beginners. Big, beefsteak



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The appearance of the tomato's yellow flowers indicate that the plant has begun the process of producing fruit.

types can be challenging, and tend to ripen later. In our area, when shopping for tomatoes, look for those with 60 to 80 day growing seasons.

When looking at growth habits, tomatoes fall into three categories: determinate, indeterminate or semi-determinate. Growth habit determines the size of the plant, the pattern of fruit ripening and the type of plant support and pruning the plant requires.

Determinate plants tend to ripen their fruit over a short period, so it is a good choice for a cold-climate area. They usually do not require staking. Some recommended varieties are: Oregon Spring, Siletz and Legend. These are all slicer types.

Indeterminate tomatoes grow and produce flowers all season. These types of tomatoes produce fruit continually and ripen over extended periods. Some popular varieties are: Big Beef, Big Daddy, Caiman, Early Girl and most cherry types. Also in this category you will find sauce/paste tomatoes like San Marzano and Roman.

Semi-determinate tomatoes have a growth habit between that of the indeterminate and determinate types. They produce vigorous lateral shoots that often terminate in a flowering cluster of fruits. Fantastic

is a variety that falls in this category and is high yielding and a great slicer type.

A number of tomato cultivars do not fit into the descriptions above. These include heirloom types that vary tremendously in size, shape, color, taste and other attributes. An heirloom is generally considered to be a variety that has been passed down through several generations of a family because of its valued characteristics.

Since heirloom varieties have become popular in the past few years, there have been liberties taken with the use of this term for commercial purposes. Popular varieties include Brandywine, Old German and Stupice.

Here are some tips for growing big, beautiful tomatoes:

- Select sturdy plants.
- Put in a plot that gets a good six hours of sun or more.
- Plant in well-drained soil that's been amended with organic material such as compost or well-rotted manure.
- When planting, pluck off the leaves at the bottom of the stem and bury the plant in the soil 5 to 10 inches deeper than it comes in the pot. Additional roots will form along the stem.
- As the plant grows, remove branches and leaves close to the ground to help prevent

soil-borne diseases.

■ Give your plants plenty of room so that air can circulate and sun can penetrate. This will result in more vigorous plants that can more easily fight off diseases or pests.

■ Use a strong tomato cage or trellis for support.

■ Start fertilizing about two weeks after planting with a 5-10-10 mixture. Feed according to the package directions about every three weeks until fruit ripens.

■ Don't wait for soil to completely dry out between watering. Irrigate deeply every two to three days. Overwatering can cause fruit to crack.

■ On side stems with no blossoms, pinch them off at the V where they meet the main stem. This will force energy to develop the fruit rather than the plant foliage.

■ To prevent blossom end rot use a high calcium amendment.

■ Use mulch to conserve moisture, control weeds and prevent soil-borne diseases.

■ Always rotate your tomato crop from year to year.

If garden space is limited, you can raise tomatoes successfully in containers. Determinate cultivars are ideal because they tend to be smaller, and are easier to trellis.

Use a container that is at least 15 inches deep. Tomato plant growth is limited by container size, so the larger the container, the greater the growth and production will be. Use good quality potting soil, and follow the fertilizer practice recommended above.

Tomatoes are one of those vegetable fruits that you can do so much with. You can turn them into sauce, juice and paste; freeze them, can them, dry them and turn them into pickles if they didn't ripen. They make terrific soups, pizza toppings, sandwiches and salads. And there is nothing like simply eating a fresh tomato in the garden.

Everyone wants to grow big, beautiful tomatoes. It's a universal food people tend to like. Be sure to include several varieties in your garden this summer!

Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at ask.extension.org/ask. (Presently, the plant clinic is closed until further notice due to public safety orders.) Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.