

How to pick tomatoes at the right time



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Question: I remember visiting my grandmother in the winter years ago and she was still serving fresh tomatoes from her summer garden. How did she do it? I wish I had paid attention!

AnsWER: There is nothing better than eating just-picked, fresh tomatoes from your summer garden. Unless, of course, it is eating fresh tomatoes from your summer garden in the winter!

My grandmother did that, too! It is unfortunate that so many things that were common knowledge and practice at the time are lost to us.

First, temperature and humidity are extremely important during storage. The location you select could be in a garage, a shed or a protected part of your porch.

It's also important to keep a fairly constant temperature of between 50-65 degrees with humidity between 35-40%.



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Look for a white star on the base of your tomatoes. This indicates that tomato to be a good candidate for storage and controlled ripening.

The higher the temperature in that range, the quicker they will ripen. Also, if the humidity is too high your tomatoes will be in danger of rotting.

Conversely, if temperatures are colder, it will slow down ripening and it is possible that you will still have fresh tomatoes in December! To ensure that the humidity is just right, you may want to use a humidifier.

Pick the tomatoes that you are going to store when they are green. Look for a white star on the base of the fruit

which indicates that tomato to be a good candidate. Pick them also before the first frost. Tomatoes will quickly spoil if exposed to frost.

Clean each one under clean, running water and dry completely. While drying, inspect your tomatoes for any spots, softness or damage. While these are fine to use fresh, do not select these for storage. Any damage will encourage rotting and it may spread to the other tomatoes.

The container you select should be shallow

and large enough to store the tomatoes in one layer with each tomato being spaced from 2-3 inches apart. Layer the bottom of the container with paper toweling or cardboard, but not too thick. This layer is to ensure that any leakage will hopefully be confined to that one tomato.

Once stored, check your tomatoes every two to three days. You are checking for ripeness and spoilage. Remove any that are spoiling or mushy. Also, you can now remove and bring

into your kitchen any tomato that is at least 50% ripe to finish ripening on your kitchen counter and enjoying on your dinner table. Do not put these in your refrigerator.

Knowing how to slowly ripen tomatoes to make them last into the fall and winter is great, but what if you want to ripen your tomatoes quickly? A banana will really speed up the process. Putting the tomatoes in a paper bag or cardboard box with a barely green banana will speed the process for you.

Although the tomato produces ethylene gas when ripening, it produces much less making it a much slower process on its own. A barely green banana produces much more of the gas than tomatoes produce, thus speeding up the ripening process.

Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, by phone at 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.