

One of the best ways to get early, blemish-free tomatoes is to stake or support the vines. Tomato vines can be allowed to sprawl over a mulched area in the garden, but this will often result in later-bearing and damaged fruit. Rambling tomato vines also take up a lot of valuable garden space. Insects and diseases may get out of hand before you notice them, too.

Staking is best done immediately when the plants are set into the garden. If you push stakes into the ground after the plants are already growing, you're liable to damage the tender feeder root system.

Single or cross-supported stakes can be used, but single stakes require more work to keep vines growing. Loosely attach tomato vines to the supports with figure-eight loops of old nylon stockings or strips of cloth. Take care not to damage stem. Because side shoots can become unmanageable and delay fruiting, prune all staked plants so only main stems develop.

Another popular support is to contain the plant within a wire cage. Off the ground, the tomatoes won't rot, and the plant's leaves provide enough shade to cut down on sunscald and fruit cracking. The fruit is also much easier to harvest, and you can see at a glance if it is ripe.

If you only have a few tomato plants, plant several on the outside of a tomato cage. Simply dig a hole two feet deep and the diameter of the cage. Then fill the hole with well-rotted compost, and set the cage around the perimeter, setting it firmly into the ground. Next plant four tomato plants around the outside of the cage, tying them to the wire as they become taller. The tomato roots will seek out the adjacent compost and feed well. This trick also saves a lot of garden space.