

Tomato

Almost a universal vegetable, the tomato provides rewarding yields in practically any soil and with little care. The tomato, a warm-season crop, grows in nearly any sunny spot.

Varieties

Tomatoes come in several hundred varieties, some of which are best suited to your area, depending on length of season and overall climate. Study catalogs carefully.

Most tomatoes grow vigorous vines (indeterminate). Others grow more compact bushes (determinate). The bush varieties come in earlier and take up less space. They are good for small gardens and container gardening.

Tomatoes come in a fascinating array of colors and shapes. They range in color from pink to white to yellow. Their size differences can be just as remarkable, ranging from small ones the size of marbles to giants that weigh in at several pounds. Breeders offer many varieties resistant to common diseases. Each variety is labeled to indicate this resistance. The letters V, F, N, S, and C behind a variety name indicate that a plant will resist verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt, nematodes, stemphylium, and cladosporium.

Planting

Because tomatoes require a long growing season, start seeds eight weeks before transplanting. Or buy seedlings from a garden center. Plant seedlings after all danger of frost passes. (Or gamble by setting plants outside early, protecting them from the cold at night.) Set plants 2 feet apart in rows 3 feet apart. Plant caged or staked seedlings closer. Strip the lower leaves from each seedling and bury the entire stem. If cutworms are a problem, place a collar around the stem of each plant.

Care

Keep the soil moist. In the far North, use clear or black plastic as a heat-retaining mulch, watering the ground before laying it. In other areas, mulch around the plants with a thick layer of organic mulch. Pull weeds by hand; a hoe could damage plant roots. Fertilize lightly to encourage healthy growth. Control the vining habit of indeterminate varieties by pinching off the suckers that sprout from the joints where the leaf stems join the main stems.

Harvest

For juiciest fruit and sweetest taste, ripen tomatoes on the vine. Ripe tomatoes will pop off the vine with just a slight tug. Refrigerate ripe tomatoes. For canning, pick tomatoes before they completely ripen because of their higher acidity at this stage. When frost threatens, pick green tomatoes, wrap in newspapers, and store in a cool, dark place until fully ripe. Compost tomato vines at the season's end to prevent diseases and pests from overwintering.