Tips for Growing Great Tomatoes

Most tomato varieties available to the home gardener produce flavorful and juicy fruit and require relatively little space for a large yield. When properly cared for, each tomato plant can bear 10 to 15 pounds or more of fruit. They are warm-weather plants that like sunshine and produce best when planted in a well-exposed area in the garden with daytime temperatures between 80 – 90°F, and nighttime temperatures above 50 - 55°F.
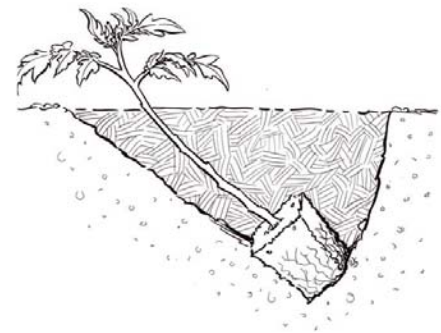
Select the planting site
- Plant in a location with full sunlight (at least 6 hours a day)
- Location should be a well-exposed area in the garden not shaded by trees, fences, or walls
- Plant away from areas that will be watered by lawn sprinklers
- Avoid areas heavily infested with weeds or that have had previous disease problems

Prepare the soil
- Medium-textured, soft, well-drained soil is optimal
- Light sandy soils or heavy clay soils are hard to work with but can be made easier with amendments
- Add large amounts of sifted compost or other soil amendments so that the planting area (raised beds) are above the previous level of soil

Planting
- Plant after the danger of frost has passed
- Allow 2 - 3 feet between plants
- Plant young plants with 4 to 6 true leaves, slightly hardened to outdoor conditions
- Water plants thoroughly before planting
- Plant in late afternoon so water loss from the plants will be minimized during the cooler overnight hours
- Ease plants out of the container before transplanting and gently loosen the roots
- Avoid handling the main stems of transplants (the tiny "hairs" on the stems become valuable roots when buried in the soil); try to handle them by the leaves or root ball
- Pinch off the lower leaves of tall, lanky plants with few leaves and set the plants into the soil horizontally with just a few sets of top leaves showing above the ground
- Press soil firmly around each transplant so that a slight depression is formed for holding water
- Water in thoroughly to settle the soil and eliminate any air pockets around the roots
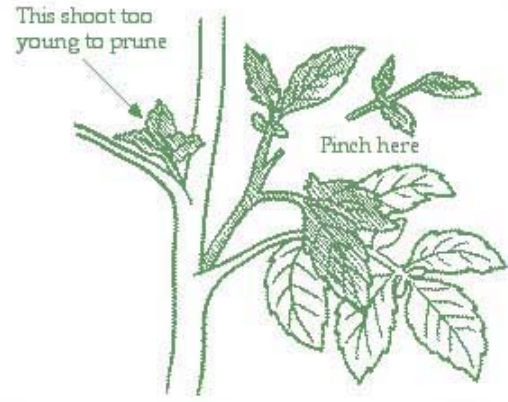
Watering
- Avoid wetting the foliage or fruit with overhead watering
- Keep adequate moisture in the deeper soil layers even when plants are small
- Water deeply by drip or furrow irrigation to encourage deep rooting; if the first 2 inches of soil is dry then water; if moist, do not water
- Gradually reduce the frequency of watering to every 7 - 10 days for mature plants that have set fruit

Fertilizing
- Healthy, vigorous transplants should not require additional fertilizer until flowering and fruit set are well under way
- Minimize nitrogen fertilizer during the initial growth period; it produces green vegetative growth but will delay flowering and fruit set and make the plants more attractive to insect pests
- At fruit set, side dress with nitrogen fertilizer every 4 - 6 weeks following instructions on the product label

Pruning
- Pruning is not always necessary
  - Plants with two or more stems produce more tomatoes with better foliage protection from the sun than plants with one stem
  - Plants pruned to one leader will bear earlier but with less yield overall
  - A dense leaf canopy may reduce the incidence of black mold and cracking but may increase the incidence of other fruit molds such as gray mold
  - Severe pruning to one stem will reduce your total crop greatly and also is likely to increase the incidence of some diseases or disorders
- Choose the stems you want to keep and pinch out the others as they develop
- Before removing suckers or side shoots on a tomato plant, wait until two leaves develop and pinch above them

Provide support
- Indeterminate varieties need to be supported by sturdy trellises, cages, or stakes

Harvest and store
- Harvest when fruit are at full color for the variety
- Store at 55° to 70°F to maintain their fresh, ripe flavor
- Lengthy refrigeration causes flavor loss and browning discoloration of fruit

Key Temperatures

Temperature (F)	Comments
100°	Flowers will not set
80°–90°	Optimum growth
50°–55°	Minimum night temperature for fruit set
45°	Will grow slowly
32°	Potential injury by frost