



## Master Gardeners Santa Clara County

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## Growing Great Tomatoes By Nancy Garrison

### SITE SELECTION

Tomatoes do best when planted in full sun all day, although they will usually produce some crop with less. If your plants have had symptoms of disease in previous years, it is important to plant in soil that has not grown tomatoes or their relatives such as peppers or eggplants for three or more years.

### SOIL PREPARATION

Depending on your soil, tomatoes often do best with only a generous application of homemade compost mixed well into the planting area as much of our Santa Clara valley floor is quite fertile. When I have added any additional nitrogen, including my beloved alfalfa meal, I have gotten more foliage at the expense of fruit. Just planting into plain soil produces plants that are 7'–8' tall and 3'–4' wide with some of the larger, more robust indeterminate types.

### PLANTING

- You can either transplant directly into the ground or transplant into a larger container like a one-gallon and let grow in a warm, protected, sunny location for 2–3 more weeks after purchasing seedlings in 4" pots.
- Harden off, gradually acclimating plants to outdoor conditions, for 4–7 days before transplanting into the ground in first couple of weeks of May.
- Remove lower leaves and plant deeper than plant was in original container. It works well to lay tomato horizontally in planting hole so stem is 2"–4" beneath soil with just the growing tip above ground. Roots will form at leaf nodes, which are where leaves had been or are growing.

### SUPPORTING THE PLANTS

- Provide hefty support for indeterminate (tall) types of tomato plants. Example: a 5'–6' tall cage made of concrete reinforcing wire with 6" mesh so your hands can reach the ripe fruit. By making varying diameters such as 18", 20" and 22" they can be nested one inside the other for neater storage. These cages will need to be further supported with a strong stake such as rebar or a 2" x 2" wood at least 4' tall pounded in next to cage and wired to it. Put the cage on soon after planting so it is easy to get over plant.
- Bush or determinate types may need no support or just the lightweight 3' tall cages widely available.
- Semi-determinate types, which usually reach about 4' tall, will do fine in the medium-weight 4' tall tomato cages, the bottoms of which are just pushed into the ground.
- Another great, easy way to support tomatoes is by pounding in 7' metal T-stakes about 6' apart and stretching the concrete reinforcing wire flat like a fence between the stakes. As the tomatoes grow, you weave the tomato foliage into the fence.

### GROWING YOUR TOMATOES

- Irrigate about twice a week during the early part of the season, reducing water by as much as 50% as fruit begins to ripen to reduce cracking and subsequent rot and to intensify flavor.
- Pinch off small side shoots in leaf axils before they are 6" long when necessary to reduce overcrowding in cage.
- Pinch all growth that goes more than a foot above cage so it doesn't flop over and shade out rest of plant.

### MOST COMMON TOMATO PROBLEMS

Most common and still least recognized is the tomato russet mite which causes plants to get dead leaves starting at bottom of plant and moving upwards. Stem takes on a bronzy appearance. It is easy to control with application of a wettable sulfur mixed in a pump up sprayer with a spreader sticker and applied to entire plant including undersides of leaves and deep into the interior of the plant. Sulfur should not be applied if temperature is expected to be above 90° F.

### AND FINALLY

Since it is so hard to find the tomato label as the plant grows, it works well to attach it to the cage at eye level. I like writing on 3" x 3" pieces of cottage cheese or yogurt container with a permanent marker and using a paper punch make a hole that allows it to be attached easily to the cage with a twistee or nursery tape.