

# Tomato FAQ

**1. Q. When should I start my seed indoors to produce tomato transplants for my garden?**

A. Depending upon temperature and how the plants are grown, it takes from 6 to 8 weeks to produce a healthy, 6-inch tall transplant for setting out in your garden. The plants should be grown in a warm area and receive 6 to 8 hours of sunlight daily or tall, poor quality, leggy plants will result.

**2. Q. How do you select good transplants at nurseries or garden centers?**

A. First, select the Extension recommended varieties of transplant whether it be tomatoes, peppers, eggplant or broccoli. Also, look for plants that appear healthy, dark green in color, and do not have any spots or holes in the leaves. The ideal tomato, pepper or eggplant transplant should be just about as wide as it is tall. Avoid tall, spindly plants.

**3. Q. How often should my tomatoes be fertilized?**

A. It is necessary to fertilize the garden before planting tomatoes. Apply the fertilizer again when fruit first sets. From that point on, an additional fertilization (side dress) every week to 10 days is recommended. Plants grown on sandy soils should be fertilized more frequently than those grown on heavy, clay soils. A general side dress fertilizer recommendation is one to two tablespoons of a complete fertilizer scattered around the plant and worked into the soil. If using a fertilizer high in nitrogen such as ammonium nitrate or sulfate, reduce the rate to one tablespoon per plant.

**4. Q. Should tomato plants be staked, caged or left unsupported?**

A. Tomatoes should be supported. Whether you cage or stake them is personal preference. Regardless of the method, plants with foliage and fruit supported off the ground will produce more than unsupported plants. Caging has several advantages. It involves less work than staking. Once the cage is placed over the plant there is no further manipulation of the plant - - no pruning, no tying. The fruit are simply harvested as they ripen. In many areas, staking and pruning of the plant to a single or multiple stem results in sunburn when the developing fruit is exposed to excessive sunlight. Other advantages of caging over staking include protection of fruit from bird damage by more vigorous foliage cover and less fruit rot. Caged tomato vines produce more fruit of a smaller size, but staked and tied plants produce less fruit which mature earlier yet are larger.

**5. Q. My tomato plants look great. They are dark green, vigorous and healthy. However, flowers are not forming any fruit. What is the problem?**

A. Several conditions can cause tomatoes to not set fruit. Too much nitrogen fertilizer, nighttime temperatures over 70 degrees F., low temperatures below 50 degrees F., irregular watering, insects such as thrip or planting the wrong variety may result in poor fruit set. Any of these conditions can cause poor fruit set, but combinations can cause failures. If Extension recommended varieties are used, the main reason tomato plants do not set fruit is because they are not planted where they can receive 8-10 hours of direct sunlight daily. Any less direct sunlight will result in a spindly growing, nonproductive plant with healthy foliage.

**6. Q. Are there really low-acid tomato varieties?**

A. There are some varieties that are slightly less acidic than others, but this difference is so slight that there is no real difference in taste or in how the tomatoes should be processed. Some yellow-fruited types are slightly less acidic than the normal red varieties, but not enough to make any difference. If you feel that you need to add acid to each jar use one tablespoon of lemon juice. Research conducted by the USDA indicates that all varieties available to the home gardener are safe for water bath processing as long as good quality fruit are used. Flavor differences which exist between varieties are not because of differences in acid content, but balances of the sugar to acid ratio.

**7. Q. Some tomato varieties are recommended because they are determinate and fast maturing. What does determinate mean and can you tell if a tomato is determinate by looking at it?**

A. Determinate means the plant is small. Determinate tomato varieties seldom are more than 5 to 6 feet tall. A determinate vine is distinguished by a repeating pattern of two leaves followed by a flower or fruiting cluster. An indeterminate vine has a repeating pattern of three or four leaves, then a cluster.

8. Q. Can I save seeds from my tomatoes from next season's plantings, and if so how?

A. You can save seed from tomatoes if the variety is not a hybrid. Hybrid tomatoes do not come true from seed. The plants and fruit from seed saved from your home garden may or may not resemble the parent. Chances are the fruit will be poorer quality and the vine characteristics will not be the same as the parent plant. However, for true breeding varieties, such as Homestead, it is easy to save seed. To save seed from tomatoes or any other home vegetable fruit crop, leave the fruit on the plant until it is mature, pull it, squeeze juice with seed into a glass, let this ferment for two days adding water if needed. Rinse the seeds two or three times to remove debris. Seeds will settle to the bottom. After rinsing the seeds, blot them and place them in the sun to dry. Store the seeds under cool dry conditions.

9. Q. When caging tomatoes, how large should the cage be?

A. The diameter of the cage should be at least 18 to 20 inches. Smaller cages often restrict plant growth and reduce yields. Height of the cage will vary but generally 2 feet is sufficient for the recommended varieties. However, if vining types such as Better Boy, Homestead or Terrific, are used a cage 5 feet in height is preferred. Regardless of variety, the 2 foot tall cage is sufficient for most fall garden tomatoes.

10. Q. How do you stake tomatoes?

A. Staking involves pruning or suckering the plant to either one or two main stalks. Tomatoes grown without support develop a bush shape. However, if the plant is to be trellised or staked, it must be pruned to a single or double stalk. The small suckers which develop between the axial of the leaf and the stem are removed to develop a vine structure rather than a bush. A wooden stake an inch in diameter and 6 feet long is driven into the ground beside the plant. Do not damage the root system when inserting the stake in the ground. The stalk of the plant is loosely attached to the stake as it grows. The plant can be attached to the stake with twist-ties, soft string, and strips of cloth or panty hose. The plant is sufficiently supported if it is attached to the stake at 12 to 14 inch intervals. Continued suckering to prevent the plant from developing more than one or two central stems. If a double-stalk plant is desired leave the sucker produced above the first flower cluster since it will be the most vigorous.

11. Q. What causes a tomato to crack? Is there anything I can do to prevent it?

A. Cracking is a physiological disorder caused by soil moisture fluctuations. When the tomato reaches the mature green stage and the water supply to the plant is reduced or cut off, the tomato will begin to ripen. At this time a cellophane-like wrapper around the outer surface of the tomato becomes thicker and more rigid to protect the tomato during and after harvest. If the water supply is restored after ripening begins, the plant will resume translocation of nutrients and moisture into the fruit. This will cause the fruit to enlarge; which in turn splits the wrapper around the fruit and results in cracking. The single best control for cracking is a constant and regular water supply. Apply a layer of organic mulch to the base of the plant. This serves as a buffer and prevents soil moisture fluctuation. Water plants thoroughly every week. This is especially important when the fruits are maturing. Some varieties are resistant to cracking, but their skin is tougher.

12. Q. What could cause the leaves of my tomatoes to turn brown along the edges?

A. Leaf-burn or scorch generally indicates root injury, quite often caused by heavy amounts of fertilizer applied too near the roots. This injury often results in browning and die back of the ends and margins of the leaves. Other possible causes are root injury caused by nematodes, insects or physical injury by cultivation. Also over watering or under watering along with diseases might cause leaf-tip burn.

13. Q. About the time my tomatoes ripen and turn red, I lose at least half my crop to bird damage. What can prevent this?

A. Bird damage is common in all areas. One control method which works quite well is to take old nylon stockings and cut them into pieces 10 to 12 inches long. Tie a knot in one end of the stocking and slip the open