

SPRIT OF GARDENING

Tomatoes

TOMATOES

These popular, pleasantly flavoured fruits are rich in sources of vitamins A, B1 and C. Great variety among tomatoes exists; size of plants, size and shape of the fruit to the colour ranging from red to yellow to orange to creamy white.

The growing season in most of Alberta is about four months (mid May to mid September) so tomato gardeners usually give their plants a head start indoors. Starting the seeds in March should allow enough time for seedlings to be garden-ready by mid-May. If tomatoes are planted early, keep an eye on the overnight low temperatures just to be safe — if the forecast is for near freezing temps, cover your tomato plants at night.

Tomato plants will take anywhere from 45 days to three months to mature, depending upon the type you choose. Seed packets generally give the estimated time to maturity.

PLANTING

Planting outside is usually done around the end of May when the danger of frost has past. If tomatoes are planted early, cover the plants on nights where freezing temperatures is a potential.

Tomatoes like to be planted in warm, sunny, sheltered spots with at least 6 hrs of sun.

SOIL

Tomatoes do well in slightly acidic soils, but almost any soil can be amended for tomatoes easily.

Adding organic matter such as leaves, grass clippings and compost will improve the drainage quality of the soil making it perfect for tomato plants. The roots need an ongoing water supply but don't over-water, they won't do well in a saturated environment. Covering the plants with a straw mulch will suppress weeds and retain more moisture for the plants.

Gardens should be replenished with organic matter every season to enhance soil quality and provide it with nutrients and microorganisms that the roots require for healthy plants.

FERTILIZER

Make a trench about eight inches deep for your plants but before placing them, add a thin layer of fertilizer into your trench, either 5-10-10, compost, or prepared dehydrated animal manure.

Cover the layer of fertilizer with a couple inches of soil and then place your seedlings to a depth of 3 or 4 inches. It's important that the roots are not in direct contact with fertilizer as the salts will dehydrate them, but near enough that they'll absorb nutrients from the fertilizer in the soil as they grow. If you mix compost into the soil there's no worry about plant roots becoming dehydrated.

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PRUNING

This is the one that often gets missed. Plants do need some leaves, but too many leaves will actually drain energy away from the plant. All the water and nutrients that the roots soak up must be distributed to those extra leaves.

Eliminate all suckers. Suckers are the little shoots that appear in the elbow between the stem and a branch. Just bend it over and it will snap right off.

Remove any branches that are brown or wilting at the bottom. For these, grasp the stem firmly in your hand and push the branch down with your thumb – it will snap off at its natural breaking point.

Did you know that it only takes three branches to support one cluster of fruit? A healthy, unstressed tomato plant should put out three branches, then a cluster of fruit, three more branches, another cluster of fruit, etc. Once the tomato plant has reached a good size, start removing three branches per week from the bottom of your plant. Thus, by the time you are ready to pick your tomatoes, there will be no leaves below that fruit cluster.

Note: For all tomato pruning, avoid cutting them off with a knife or other tools. Snapping them out with your fingers is very easy and the wound caused by breaking heals quickly. A cut is more likely to allow disease to enter.

GROWING TOMATOES

There are a few different methods for growing tomatoes. If they are planted in hanging baskets or upside down baskets gravity will do the work and the fruit will spill out from the container.

If tomatoes are being grown in a container or garden they will need to be staked for support. Tomatoes can be staked, caged or trained on string.

With staking or caging the tomato plant will need to be tied to the structure, it is important to keep the tie loose against the plant.

