

# Garden Dirt

from Oak Park Community Garden

## IT'S TOMATO TIME!

### Part I: Planting and Growing Them

Home grown tomatoes are like nothing else. No wonder they're so popular with backyard gardeners. If you want to grow a special variety you can't find in nurseries, you can sprout the seeds indoors and grow your own transplants. I'm a grow-everything-from-seed person, but that's just me, and I'm pretty sure I'm in the minority. Since it's easier and quicker to grow tomatoes from transplants you buy at the nursery, that's the method we'll go with here.

- To help insure growing success, choose a disease-resistant variety that suits your taste and climate zone. Generally, the more letters after the name, the better. Each letter represents a disease the variety is resistant to. Check out the labels on 'Champion,' 'Better Boy,' 'Ace Hybrid,' or 'Celebrity'. For faster gratification, plant an early variety, maybe 'Early Girl Improved,' 'Fourth-of-July', or 'Enchantment'. If you can't resist the taste of an heirloom like 'Brandywine,' 'Cherokee Purple' (yum!), or 'Green Zebra,' go for it, but these types are more difficult to grow.
- To reduce damage from nematodes, grow heirlooms in soil rich with organic matter or release beneficial nematodes. Don't prune them. It opens up stems to disease; and don't plant them in the same spot year after year. Raised beds or even large pots work well. Before planting pots, remove and replace the top layer of old potting soil with fresh mix. (If you have the space, plant early and late, and wait a month to plant another round for fall tomatoes. By waiting to plant, I picked my last tomato of 2010 in December!)
- Choose a spot in full sun (tomatoes love sun). Dig the soil deeply with a spade and add organic soil amendment, like aged homemade or bagged compost.
- Use either an organic vegetable fertilizer or one specially recommended for tomatoes. Don't forget the organic fertilizer!
- Special Note: Your tomato plants transplants are small now, but if they're happy, they'll grow to be HUGE! **Plant them AT LEAST 24 INCHES APART.** This allows for air circulation and discourages fungal diseases and mold.
- Plant transplants deeply. Most are leggy, so snip off the lower leaves, make a little trench with the trowel, lay the plant in sideways and bend the stem up gently. Roots will form all along the buried stem. Alternative method: dig a deeper hole and plant vertically. In either case, again, **don't forget the organic fertilizer** in amounts suggested on the package for transplants.



MATURE TOMATOES IN 24 in. CONCRETE REINFORCING WIRE CAGES

- Choose a staking system (see Part II).
- Water deeply at the roots using the garden hose, and allowing the water to soak into the ground. Gradually lengthen times between waterings, until you are watering deeply every 1 to 2 weeks along the coast, more frequently in interior zones. When watering tomatoes, make sure you get the water straight to the roots. Don't water from above; it can encourage diseases and pests, and unnecessarily wastes water. Drip systems aren't so good for tomatoes either; they create uneven moisture, and can cause blossom end rot. And, overwatering can cause root rot and wet, rotting fruit. Sheesh. Gotta get that watering right, huh?

## Part II: How to Stake Tomatoes

Don't let tomatoes sprawl on the ground; rot, rot, rot, or critters, critters, critters. Ya gotta get 'em up off the ground for optimum harvest. Here are three staking methods. Each works for a different group of tomatoes, gives different results, and requires different training...



BLOSSOM END ROT

**ONE:** Bend a 6 1/2-foot length of 5-foot tall, 6-by-6 hardware cloth or cement-reinforcing wire to make a round cage 2 feet across. Place a cage over each plant. Stake it down firmly to withstand wind.

**Pruning and Training:** Don't prune at all. The tomato will climb up inside the cage by itself and need no staking.

**Results:** This method will give you the most fruit, but the smallest. (My gardening neighbor uses this method, and his results are exactly as described. Tons of smallish fruit.)

**Areas and Growth Habit for Which Method is Recommended:** Any zone, but specially those in hot interior climates (because it keeps the fruit well shaded). Best for indeterminate varieties. (Indeterminate varieties continue growing in height all season, and are behemoths by fall.)



**TWO:** Construct a trellis of 6- or 8-foot tall hardware cloth or cement-reinforcing wire supported by three or four 8-foot stakes shoved a foot into the ground.



**Pruning and Training:** Prune out lower branches so that only two or three main stems are left to grow. You don't need to tie up the vines; just weave them gently in and out as they grow. The trellis will support them.

**Results:** The fruit will be bigger than cage-grown fruit, and more numerous than those grown by the single-stem method that follows. (However, pruning cuts may allow entrance of stem diseases.)

**Areas and Growth Habit for Which Method is Recommended:** All zones—both coastal or inland. Good system for indeterminate varieties.

**THREE:** Support each tomato with a single 8-foot stake that you embed 1 to 2 feet in the ground. Loosely tie the plant to the stake every 8 to 10 inches as the plant grows, so as not to choke or damage the branches or stem.



SUCKERS in branch crotch

**Pruning and Training:** Tie up the tomato plant (again - loosely) as it grows. With indeterminate varieties, remove all suckers allowing only one main trunk to grow. With determinate varieties (those that grow about 4 feet tall and then stop growing), no pruning is necessary.

**Results:** This method takes more work but yields large fruit and an early harvest. (I used this method almost exclusively last year with both determinates and indeterminates. Although it required faithful - seemed like daily - attention to the tying, pinching suckers and trimming bottom branches, I got lots of BIG tomatoes.)

**Areas and Growth Habit for Which Method is Recommended:**

Best method for all determinate varieties. Can be used for indeterminate varieties in coastal zones only (fruit will sunburn in hot inland areas).

**A word of caution:** If your tomatoes have ever been stricken with blight, a fungal disease that causes blackening of stems and rotting of fruit, do not prune out suckers. (Despite disease problems, most commercial growers prune indeterminate tomatoes in the early weeks of growth, in order to produce larger tomatoes in smaller space.)

Well, there you have it. Some basics to get you going with your tomatoes (if you haven't already got them in the ground). Big thanks to Pat Welch's Southern California Organic Gardening, from which comes much of my information.

—Vicki Rankin, Oak Park Community Garden

