

Wallsend Nurseries

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Tomatoes

The tomato is the most popular home garden vegetable. A huge range of varieties gives a choice of fruit from bite-sized "Cherry" to large "Ox Heart" types. Botanically the tomato is a fruit, native to South America. It is very much a warm season crop.

Prepare a spot in the garden that is sunny and very well drained. Dig in plenty of well rotted compost and some complete fertilizer. Tomatoes have a deep root system, so make sure the bed is dug to at least a spade's depth. The soil needs to be slightly acid for best results. A pH of approximately 5.5-6.5 is ideal.

New season's plantings can take place anytime from late August onwards in frost-free areas. In areas where frost could be a problem it's best to delay until mid-late September.

Most tomatoes grown in the home garden are produced from seed but a newer method is to buy grafted plants. Grafted tomatoes are very much more disease resistant than seedling grown varieties and are far more vigorous. These need to be grown more like a vine on a trellis than a stake as they are very vigorous and will occupy a much larger area than a seedling will. Treat them the same as a seedling but allow far more room for them to grow. Most grafted tomato growers train the plants in a fashion similar to a grape vine, over a trellis or along a shed wall. The rewards are a huge crop and superior disease resistance. The grafted plants are a little more expensive than similar seed grown varieties but are well worth it. One grafted plant is said to be equal to 6-10 ungrafted plants in terms of cropping and disease resistance.

Tomatoes should be planted about 600mm apart, or preferably 1m apart for really good results. Stakes of approx 1.8m (6') should be provided to support the developing plants. Wide spacing is good as it allows good air circulation around the plants thus lowering the probability of fungal disease setting in.

All types of tomatoes should be staked and tied.....even those that are recommended as "non-staking".

Pruning is a simple operation. Pinch out the laterals which develop at the point where the leaves meet the stem. Retain two or three leaders per plant but remove any excess side shoots, particularly those close to the ground as they are likely to pick up disease spores from the soil surface. Pinch the top out of the leaders when they reach the top of the stake.

Tomatoes are affected by both too much water and not enough. When planting new crops it's a good idea to water daily if the weather is warm. If not, water at least three times a week as long as the plants are not wilting. During hot summers poor crops often result if watering is poor or erratic. Adopting a watering method that ensures a constant supply of water to the plants is essential for reliable, trouble free crops. Mulching before the hot weather sets in is a great idea. Sugar cane or lucerne mulch is ideal for this purpose.

Stake the plants as they grow to avoid damage to the young shoots. Tie them with a soft tie material such as budding tape or old rag. Liquid fertilize throughout the growing season. Thrive® or Aquasol® are ideal.

Tomatoes are a disease prone crop. Spray with Mancozeb® at the recommended intervals to help control fungal and insect problems. Fruit fly is a very large problem and MUST be treated. Use Rogor® at the recommended dosages and timing to help ensure control. Blossom end rot is caused by a Calcium deficiency and is not a disease. The basal end of the fruit (where the flower used to be) goes black and sunken and often a secondary fungal rot will set in. Ensure adequate moisture at all times and it's a good idea to lime the soil lightly before planting to provide the extra calcium needed by the developing plants.

Varieties for the home gardener include:

Grosse Lisse..Probably the most well known variety. Superb flavour but disease prone.

Ox Heart...Another old favourite but VERY prone to problems.

Mighty Red..One of the best varieties, disease resistant and tasty.

Roma..Very popular egg-shaped tomato.

Rouge de Marmande...Beautifully flavoured cold resistant variety.

Moonshot...Popular disease resistant variety.

Super Prize...excellent dwarf type with high yields for it's size.

Grafted varieties...All of the above with extreme vigour added due to the strong root stock.