

Growing tomatoes

Tomatoes are easy to grow provided you can give them the right conditions and keep them well watered and fed. Cordon varieties will also need training.

Supermarket tomatoes will never taste the same again once you've picked fully ripened fruits off your own plants. In our uncertain summers, growing tomatoes in a greenhouse is the surest way to get a reasonable crop in all parts of the country. Outdoor crops can be worthwhile too, at least in milder parts of the UK. And even if you only have a patio, there are varieties to grow in pots or even hanging baskets.

What you will need

Small pots and multi-purpose compost for seed raising, and somewhere warm to keep them. Growing bags are a cheap source of compost, but can be difficult to manage. Some larger pots (30cm wide) are a good investment - tip the growing bag compost into them. You'll also need some tomato feed. In our March 07 trial, Westland Feed-all was the best slow-release fertiliser for tomatoes and we'll be testing tomato feed soon but you should choose one that contains magnesium.

Sowing the seed

Tomato plants are usually ready to plant out 8-10 weeks from sowing, slightly longer under cooler conditions. Sow greenhouse tomatoes during March and outdoor varieties from late March to early April.

Tomato seed is quite easy to germinate, as long as you provide a temperature of at least 15°C, but preferably nearer 21°C. Fill a 7.5cm pot with multi-purpose compost, level and firm lightly. Stand the pot of compost in a bowl of water until the surface glistens, then remove and leave to drain. Space a couple of seeds on the surface and cover with a dusting of compost. Cover the pot with a piece of clingfilm and put it somewhere warm - a windowsill in a centrally heated room or the airing cupboard for 10 days would be ideal, but check it regularly. When seedlings begin to emerge, move the pot to a well-lit windowsill, but make sure the temperature doesn't drop below 15°C. An electric propagator will work even better.

Growing on

Tomato plants grow rapidly, but the aim is to produce short, stocky plants. If they start to get tall and leggy, they aren't getting enough light, and if they look pale, they should be potted into a bigger pot or given a liquid feed. Keep them well watered but take care not to overwater, otherwise they will rot.

You can skip these early stages altogether by buying young plants from a garden centre or nursery. Look for dark green, stocky plants and one of the varieties listed

below. When the roots start to fill the pot completely, move them into a slightly larger pot. They should end up in 10-12.5cm pots in late April to late May, when they are ready for hardening off. By this time you should notice the first truss of flowers forming.

Growing in the greenhouse

If the greenhouse is heated to keep it free of frost, you can plant out from early April. If not, wait until late April in milder areas or mid-May in colder areas. If growing in the greenhouse border, prepare the soil first by digging in plenty of organic matter and 35-70g a sq m of a general purpose fertiliser. Plant them about 40 cm apart.

Alternatively, plant two plants to a growing bag or one plant to a 30cm pot containing multi-purpose or growing bag compost. Most greenhouse varieties are grown as cordons (see overleaf).

Growing outdoors

Most outdoor tomatoes are bush varieties and need a fair amount of space. They are best grown in the garden soil and need no supporting. You can also grow cordon varieties outdoors, in growing bags or in pots. Another option for a patio is to grow a dwarf bush variety in a 25-30cm pot. 'Tumbler' is good and will even do well in a hanging basket.

Harvesting

Supermarket tomatoes are picked underripe. They are firm and easy to pack and transport, but lack flavour. Leaving the fruits on the plant to ripen naturally greatly improves the flavour. The longer you leave them, the sweeter they'll get.

Towards the end of the season, start to prune off the older leaves to prevent the fungal disease grey mould taking hold and to let in more light.

If you find that outdoor varieties are not ripening at the end of the season, try removing foliage, covering with cloches or picking trusses to ripen indoors.

Recommended varieties

Greenhouse

Standard: 'Shirley'

Beefsteak: 'Dombito'

Cherry: 'Cherrybelle',

'Gardener's Delight', 'Santa', 'Sungold'

Plum: 'Inca', 'Roma Improved'

Outdoors

Standard: 'Tornado', 'Harbinger', 'MoneyMaker'

Beefsteak: 'Matador'

Cherry: 'Gardener's Delight', 'Red Alert', 'Tumbler'

Plum: 'Inca', 'Roma Improved'

Keeping tomatoes healthy

Most tomato problems can be avoided if you can provide the right growing conditions.

Temperature: It's essential to keep the temperature in the greenhouse as even as possible by opening vents and doors during the day and closing them at night, when temperatures start to drop in the autumn. Keeping the atmosphere moist by damping down the greenhouse floor will also help.

Watering: Water frequently, especially plants in growing bags and pots; do this up to twice a day if necessary to prevent the compost drying out.

Feeding: Feed weekly or more frequently (follow manufacturer's instructions) with a liquid tomato feed containing magnesium. Ask for *Which? Gardening* factsheet GWF345 for information on tomato diseases.

Training tomatoes

With bush varieties, you can simply let them get on with it, though you may end up with a mass of leaves and the fruit hidden underneath.

If the fruit isn't ripening quickly, later in the summer, try pruning off some of the excess

foliage to let more of the sunlight in. Cordon varieties are easier to pick, but take more work. Start by providing some form of support - either a cane or stake at least 1.5m tall outdoors, or attached to the greenhouse frame. In the greenhouse you can also use string attached to the frame and buried under the rootball when planting. Tie the main shoot to the support.

With finger and thumb, pinch out any side-shoots that grow where the leaves join the main stem. This will encourage a single strong shoot. Take care not to damage the flower trusses, which will become your crop. Keep tying in and pinching out until late August. By this time you should have anything between four and eight fruit trusses at various stages, and the top of the plant should be up in the roof of the greenhouse.

Outdoor plants will be shorter and four or five trusses are a good result. Pinch out the growing tip. This will stop the plant from producing more stems and leaves and concentrate its effort instead on ripening the fruit. Keep pinching out the side-shoots as they develop.