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## Tomato Growing Tips

Most home vegetable gardeners grow tomatoes. Sometimes, tomatoes are virtually the only thing small scale gardeners grow. If they are your only crop, you will want to do everything possible to ensure a successful yield. Below are some science-based tomato growing tips.

Plant tomatoes in full sun after the danger of frost. Tomatoes can be grown in pots and planters on patios and decks or in raised beds. This usually works relatively well the first year. However, there are drawbacks to doing this. Be aware this can lead to some disease problems and/or poor production when reusing artificial soil media over multiple years. When growing tomatoes in pots, you should thoroughly sanitize the container, replace the soil each year and select dwarf varieties.

Don't be taken in by TV or magazine ads about the upside down tomatoes – these setups have many problems. With raised beds, the best solution is to have enough space to rotate crops and include 50% or more mineral soil in your soil mix. I prefer growing tomatoes in amended mineral soil and rotating my tomatoes (and other Nightshade family crops: peppers, eggplant, potatoes) such that it is three or four years between replanting them in the same spot. Crop rotation is most critical with these crops otherwise root and stem rots can become a problem.

Many experienced vegetable gardeners grow their own tomato starts because the varieties available at garden centers are limited. This requires starting seeds in February or March and growing the plants under lights or in a greenhouse. The alternative is to purchase plants from nurseries, garden centers, or at the farmer's market. Tomato plants fall into one of two types that affect ultimate plant height and cultural requirements. Tomatoes are described as "determinate" if they eventually form a flower cluster at the terminal growing point (the top of the plant), causing the plant to stop growing in height. Plants that never set terminal flower clusters, but only lateral ones and continue to grow taller during the growing season are described as "indeterminate". Heirloom varieties are usually indeterminate.

Tomatoes do not need to be staked or caged, but this practice allows more room for other crops in small gardens and keeps the fruit from rotting when in contact with the soil. Determinate tomato varieties can be staked with small cages. Indeterminate varieties tend to get very large (6 feet or more) and will require a more substantial staking and support. Tomato cages may be made from concrete-reinforcing wire, woven-wire stock fencing or various wooden designs. Choose designs that have holes large enough to allow fruit to be picked and removed without bruising. I use steel t-posts, scrap 2 x 2's, small tree branches, and baling wire. Cages should be firmly anchored with stakes or steel posts to provide stability. Hail protection can be added by attaching fiberglass screen, floating row cover to the top of the cages – the all plastic type is easiest to work with.

Indeterminate tomato plants are vines which can be pruned as they develop. Tomato pruning is the removal of small shoots (suckers) that join the main stem where each leaf is attached. Suckers would eventually begin to fruit, but pruning reduces competition between the suckers and the fruit. Pruning directs the energy into fruit production promoting larger and earlier fruit. Remove the shoots when they are three or four inches long (removal of larger suckers can damage the plant). Remove a sucker by grasping it between your thumb and second finger and bending it to the side until it breaks. Ideally, the plants should be pruned to leave two to three fruit producing branches: the main stem, the sucker that develops immediately below the first flower cluster, and potentially another sucker below that.

Utah State University - YouTube on [How to Prune Tomatoes](#)

## **Additional Resources:**

Yavapai County Cooperative Extension

- [Selecting Tomato Varieties](#)
- [Tomato - Planting/Growing/Harvesting](#)
- [Challenges with Growing Tomatoes](#) (includes photos and explanations of problems)

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