

Tomato Growing Tips

By Jason Miller

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With mid-May fast approaching, it's time to start thinking about improving your chances for success.

Whether you say to-MAY-to or to-MAH-to, there is nothing that compares to the taste of a ripe, homegrown tomato. It doesn't matter if it is red, pink, yellow, white or green, or if it is large, medium or cherry. You grew it—and it didn't cost \$3 a pound. Although tomato plants are not the easiest plants to grow here in western Washington, they are one of the most popular choices for home gardeners.

When buying tomato plants, look for deep green leaves and for stocky, short plants that look healthy. Check the pot to see if the soil is moist and rich-looking. Do not buy wilted plants or plants with yellow leaves. And, protect them from the elements on the drive home. Translation: Don't put them in the back of an open pickup and then fly home on I-5.

Tomato plants should be set out in the garden around the middle of May. Before then, the soil and weather conditions usually are too cold, which stresses the warmth-loving plants. Catfacing, a physiological problem among some cultivars such as Oregon Spring, occurs every year because of growth disturbances during blossoming. It also can be aggravated by unseasonably cold weather and exposure to growth hormone-type herbicides such as 2,4-D.

Set your plants deep in the soil: Trim off all of the lower leaves so that when you plant them, there is about a foot of stem above the ground. All of the stem that you cover with soil will produce roots and give you a much stronger, healthier plant. Put your plants on a watering schedule and stick to it. Tomato plants need to be kept moist, so you must water at least every third day and only water at the base of the plant—no overhead watering! We recommend one inch of water per week, so a slow, deep watering is best.

Tomatoes need well-drained soil, amended with compost, peat moss and fertilizer. A 5-10-10 fertilizer is fine for tomatoes; work it into the soil well. They also need sun, so don't plant under trees or in shady places in your garden. Afternoon sun is better than morning sun, so look for a south-facing wall, which can speed up fruit growth. A tent-like structure over your tomatoes can protect from overhead watering and rain, and allow the plants to dry out if they get wet for any reason during the day.



A determinate variety, this Legend tomato is just the right size for sandwiches. Photo by Jason Miller.

Varieties and types

Tomatoes come in two main growth patterns. “Determinate” tomatoes are bushy and most of the tomatoes get ripe around the same time, although some produce fruit throughout the season. This type also is good for canning, freezing or making salsas. Examples of determinate tomatoes with larger and medium-sized fruits include Celebrity, Siletz, Oregon Spring, Santiam, Oregon Star, Roma, Legend. Cherry-size determinate tomatoes include Jolly Elf and Gold Nugget.

The other growth pattern is “indeterminate.” These plants will continue to grow and produce tomatoes throughout the growing season. Indeterminate plants are usually staked because they can grow very tall and rangy—and they don’t stop! Larger-fruited varieties include Big Boy, Better Boy, Bigger Girl, Early Girl, Chianti Rose, Green Zebra, Lemon Boy and Beef Steak. Cherry-type indeterminate tomatoes include Super Sweet 100, Sun Sugar and Sun Gold.



Indeterminate tomato plants never stop growing, as Concrete Master Gardener Jason Miller discovered after planting too many in his small hothouses. Photo by Eric Parks.

All of the above-named varieties will be available at the Master Gardener Plant Fair on Saturday, May 9, from 8 a.m. till 3 p.m., at the Skagit County Fairgrounds.

The world of tomatoes includes other types that may be of interest to you.

- **Open-pollinated** plants breed true; i.e., their seeds will produce offspring that match their parents. Examples include Oregon Star, Gold Nugget, and Legend.
- **Hybrid** plants are the offspring of two different varieties or species: Their seeds will not produce offspring that match their parents. Examples include Early Girl, Sun Gold and Jolly Elf.
- **Heirloom** tomatoes are open-pollinated plants that have been passed down through generations and are at least 50 years old. Many are from other countries. Examples include Chianti Rose, Green Zebra and Lemon Boy. My favorite tomato is an heirloom called Brandywine, which has a wonderful flavor.



Gently spicy, Green Zebra tomatoes are mottled and striped green and pale yellow when ripe. Photo by Jason Miller.

- **Parthenocarpic** plants have flowers that will form fruit without pollination. These plants set fruit in cooler temperatures, giving ripe tomatoes often 10 days to 2 weeks earlier than other types. These fruits will be seedless. The later fruits from flowers that are pollinated will contain some seeds. Examples include Oregon Spring, Siletz, and Santiam.

To find the varieties and types that will serve you best, check out as many tomato catalogs as you can. And remember, if you have questions along the way, Master Gardeners offer free plant clinics that can help clear up any confusion. To find a clinic near you, go to <http://www.skagit.wsu.edu/MG/clinics.htm>.



Allijah Gastelum of Concrete hoists a cluster of Brandywine tomatoes. An heirloom variety, Brandywine is known for its superb flavor.
Photo by Jason Miller.



Beefsteak varieties like Supersteak can boast slices that measure more than 6 inches in diameter!
Photo by Jason Miller.