

## Pruning Tomatoes

by Carol Barany

**M**aster Gardeners spent last winter and spring growing an array of annual flowers, perennials, herbs, and vegetables for their annual plant sale. On opening day, a line of early birds snaked around the building. When the doors were unlocked, where did customers run first? To the tomatoes, of course.

That means that by now, all those seedlings of America's favorite homegrown vegetable have easily doubled or tripled in size in gardens across the Yakima Valley. Many of us know all too well what can happen next. If tomatoes aren't properly staked and pruned, the growing weight of multiple fruiting branches will send the plant sprawling.

I'm embarrassed to admit there were years when, by late summer, our indeterminate tomatoes each had a dozen stems, some longer than 5 feet, all growing helter skelter. And there I was, crawling on my hands and knees through a tangle of collapsed tomato cages, trying to harvest. At the pathetic sight, more conscientious gardeners (trying to be diplomatic), could only manage, "Oh, I see you didn't prune your tomatoes this year".

A properly pruned and supported tomato plant produces earlier and larger fruit that is less likely to crack or suffer from disease. Plants lying on the ground, or dense with stems and foliage, will have less fuel to produce fruit. This means later, fewer, and smaller tomatoes.

What's more, foliage on a pruned and supported plant stays drier, making it harder for bacterial and fungal diseases to develop. Pruning works best for plants trained on strong vertical supports, such as trellises or stakes. Beginning in July, many Yakima Master Gardeners begin pruning their tomatoes, adapting the Missouri method to our hot and sunny growing season.

The first thing to know is what type of tomato you're growing. Indeterminate tomatoes keep growing, blossoming, and producing until frost puts an end to it. They get very tall, requiring some kind of trellising or support, and respond well to pruning. Determinate tomatoes, true to their name, stop growing once they reach a determined point. Removing too many stems would result in a very small crop. All that's needed is a sturdy cage to keep tomatoes off the ground, and perhaps a little pruning to open up the center of the plant for better air circulation.

Next, do you really know a sucker when you see one? A sucker is a leafy shoot that grows from every joint or crotch between a leaf and the main stem of the plant. Each sucker will become a new stem which will also produce suckers. It's a fact that the main stem of the plant produces the most tomatoes, and each subsequent stem exponentially produces fewer and fewer. Pruning out the excessive suckers will result in fewer

tomatoes, but what you have will be larger and healthier, resulting in a harvest of about the same number of pounds of better quality tomatoes.

Here's how to do it:

1. Identify the main stem. Do not prune this one.
2. From the time of planting, prune off any leaves that touch the soil. They are a vector for disease and insect damage.
3. Pinch out all the suckers that grow between the main stem and leaf at each leaf axil.
4. When the plant is 12-18 inches tall, allow one sucker to form into a secondary stem. Now you have two main stems. Some gardeners with room for a larger plant allow 3-4 main stems to grow, but no more than that.
5. As the weather warms, instead of pinching the suckers off at the main stem, allow each sucker to grow two leaves and then remove the sucker above those leaves, leaving a stub. This provides additional leaf canopy to prevent sunscald on fruits.
6. Regularly go on patrol and prune suckers early while they're still tender. Pinching them with your fingers won't leave a wound on the stem. Otherwise, use scissors to make a clean cut without damaging stem tissue. During periods of rapid growth, you may have to do this twice a week, or each time you harvest.

As summer ends, tomato plants are often still loaded with green fruit. To speed ripening, about four weeks before the first frost, remove the growing tip of each main stem. Called "topping," this type of pruning causes the plant to stop flowering and setting new fruit (which wouldn't ripen anyway), concentrating energy reserves on ripening the existing green tomatoes.

Phyllis Pugnetti, Washington State Master Gardener of the Year and expert vegetable grower, will teach a free one-hour class on 'Tomato Pruning' July 1 in the Heirloom Garden at 1522 S. 18<sup>th</sup> Avenue; and Julie Hunziker will teach on this topic on July 15 in the West Valley Food Garden, 602 S. 123<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. Classes begin at 10:00 am. Bring a lawn chair.