

Tomatoes are one of the most popular edible plants to grow. A fruit that loves hot weather, they are the highlight of the summer season for many people.

THE BASICS OF GROWING TOMATOES

Tomatoes are fast growing annual plants, that reach maturity around 80 days after germinating (this is an approximate and depends of the variety you grow). They require consistent watering, full sun position, rich soil, regular feeding and many varieties need support structure to grow on.

PLANTING

- * Before planting your tomatoes, prepare the soil well with the addition of compost, blood and bone and/or manure.
- * Leave enough space in between your tomato plants to maximise air flow
- * If your tomato needs staking, do it when you first plant the tomato so you don't damage the roots putting them in later
- * When planting a tomato seedling, plant it deeper than it is in the pot. This will encourage a stronger root system and a more resilient plant
- * Once planted apply a good layer of mulch to retain moisture and regulate soil temperature.

FEEDING

- * Tomatoes will produce better flowers (and therefore fruit) if you supplement with Sulphate of Potash. Apply a handful around the base when you first plant it, then again when flowers are forming, and a third application when your plant is full of fruit.
- * An application of lime when fruit is forming can help meet the tomato plant's calcium requirements
- * Regularly liquid feed with Seasol/Powerfood or Thrive to support the plant growing through the growing cycle.

TRAINING

- * Initially as the seedling grows, leave the lateral growth until you have a good sized shrub with many stems. Then choose the strongest three stems and tie them to the support structure. Prune off the rest, and remove lateral branches as they develop.

WATERING

- * Tomatoes need consistency when watering. If they are allowed to dry out or get too wet they are susceptible to blossom end rot, and your fruit will be spoilt.
- * If your tomatoes are in a garden bed, water them deeply about once a week (or more in the really hot summer days). In pots, check them regularly and don't let them dry out. Plants in pots can dry very quickly especially if they are planted in terracotta, or on windy days.
Don't water the foliage, this can cause fungal diseases.

PEST AND DISEASE

- * Tomatoes can be attractive to a number of pests and diseases. Keep them healthy to give them the best chance of resisting an attack.
- * Aphids, looper caterpillars, whitefly, thrips are common insect pests. Threat with eco-oil or ec-neem. Plant companions to attract beneficial insects
- * Soil born fungal diseases such as fusarium and verticillium wilt can enter the plant through their root system and will cause the plant to collapse. Remove the plant and dispose of it. Practice crop rotation
- * Blight is another common fungal disease which starts off as spotting on the leaves, and withering from the bottom of the plant. Remove these leaves and ensure there is good air flow around the plant.

COMPANION PLANTING

- * Planting a range of flowering plants in your garden increases insect biodiversity in the garden and encourages beneficial insects such as hoverflies and ladybirds which feed on pest insects like aphids. Bees and wasps act as pollinators for the fruit.
- * Marigolds are believed to be a bio-fumigant for the soil and repel nematodes which can cause root damage.
- * Lemon balm is thought to compliment tomatoes by improving their flavour.
- * Basil, capsicums, chilli and eggplants (for the flavour combination!)