

## When is a tomato ripe?

07.25.2016 Q & A:

Q: I have big tomato plants with many green tomatoes but no ripe ones. When will my tomatoes be ripe?

A: This is a common problem for us in the hot north state. It can seem to take forever until you pick your first ripe tomato. Ripening takes 40 to 60 days of good weather. During this time the fruit will gradually swell and then the green chlorophyll gradually breaks down, turning the fruit whitish. The fruit can be picked at this stage and it will ripen off the vine. Once the fruit turns white in color it usually only take a week to ripen. The full color develops, acidity increases, starch converts to sugar, and the essential oils and other precious components of flavor are created.

How a tomato ripens depends partly upon variety but temperature is important, below 50 degrees and hotter than 86 degrees, the red pigment will not develop. If your temperatures are below or above these extremes, your tomatoes will stop maturing and will stay as they are until the temperatures are moderate again. If it is too cold or too hot outside, you can pick the tomatoes once they have turned the whitish color and bring them into the house and put them in a brown paper bag with a few holes in it. This will increase the ethylene gas around the tomato and cause it to ripen.

How a tomato ripens varies a little between varieties. Most hybrid tomatoes have the uniform color gene, which causes the tomato to turn uniformly red. Often heirloom tomatoes have green shoulders that ripen later than the base of the fruit. If you wait until these tomatoes are uniformly red, they will be over ripe. It can be even harder to tell when the yellow, orange, bi-color, black and green tomatoes are ripe. It is helpful to know what color the tomato is supposed to be when ripe. If you don't know what to expect, do an internet search of the variety to see a picture of your tomato. Tomatoes that are green colored when ripe usually have a yellow blush on them. Plus, all tomatoes will "give" a little with a light squeeze when ripe.

You can keep ripe tomatoes for a couple of days at room temperature. You can increase this a little by storing them out of the sunlight and with the stem scar up. The refrigerator doesn't help. It is too cold and your tomatoes will be tasteless and mealy. If you have more than you need, freeze them for cooking later or share them with friends.