



University of California / Agriculture and Natural Resources
UCCE Master Gardeners of Yolo County
70 Cottonwood Street, Woodland, CA 95695
530-666-8737
mgyolo@ucdavis.edu
<http://ceyolo.ucanr.edu>

Tips to Successfully Grow Tomatoes

One of the tastiest and most rewarding plants to put in your edible garden is the tomato plant. There are many different varieties so you are sure to find one to fit your every need and taste preference.

Tomatoes are described as **determinate** or **indeterminate** based on the growth habit of the plant. Determinate, or “bush”, tomatoes have a somewhat bushy appearance and grow to a height of 3 to 5 feet. Determinate tomato plants bear most of their fruit within 4 to 6 weeks and then the plant will decline in vigor. Indeterminate varieties produce vines that continue to grow and set fruit summer until they are killed by frost or disease. Indeterminate plants should be supported by trellises, cages, or stakes to prevent them from sprawling on the ground leaving the plants vulnerable to disease.

Many homeowners prefer to purchase transplants for their vegetable gardens, but tomato plants may also be started indoors from seed. Seeds should be sown 6 to 8 weeks before the last spring frost date in our area. Don't start your seeds too late or you will delay your summer harvest. Tomatoes require plenty of light to grow into sturdy plants, so unless you have a sunny, south-facing window, you will need to provide a supplementary light source such as a florescent grow light.

Sowing Seeds—

- Sow seeds about ¼ inch deep in a clean, light soil mix
- Keep them warm—about 70-80 °F
- Keep evenly moist until seedling appears
- Once seeds have sprouted they will need 6-8 hours of bright light per day and regular watering

A week to 10 days before transplanting your seedlings into the garden, indoor-grown plants need to become acclimated to outdoor conditions of direct sunlight, wind, and cooler evening temperatures. This process is called “hardening off” and will give you sturdier and more vigorous plants after transplanting. Start by placing seedlings in a protected location such as a covered patio and gradually expose them to your garden conditions. Bring the plants indoors if there is a chance of frost.

Transplanting the Seedlings—

After the danger of frost has passed, tomatoes can be transplanted to your prepared garden site. Tomatoes thrive in most average garden soils in locations that receive full sun and adequate water.

- Tomato transplants should be about 6-8 inches tall and sufficiently hardened-off, stocky, and well covered with healthy leaves.
- Water them thoroughly a couple hours before setting them out and if possible plant them in late afternoon to minimize water loss.
- Roots form on the buried portions of the stems so vigorous, compact transplants can be planted about 2 inches deeper than they are planted in their pot. If you have tall, lanky plants with few leaves, pinch off the lower leaves and set the plants into the soil horizontally with just a few sets of top leaves showing above the ground.

- CAUTION--Avoid damaging the roots during planting.
- If seeds were planted in biodegradable containers such as peat or paper pots, do not remove the containers. Simply break them up slightly so the roots can easily grow out. Be sure to bury peat or paper pots completely to avoid “wicking” of water away from the root zone.
- If your plants are in plastic pots, ease them out of the pot and gently loosen the roots before planting into the soil. Press soil firmly around each transplant so that there is a slight depression for holding water.

Give your Plants Room to Grow and Support—

Tomatoes require lots of room to grow. Space rows of staked or caged tomatoes about 30-42 inches apart. Almost all indeterminate plants require some kind of support and many determinate plants benefit from staking or caging as well.

Watering and Fertilizing your Plants—

Tomatoes need regular watering during the growing season. Avoid extreme fluctuations in soil moisture as this will increase the likelihood of fruit cracking and blossom end rot. Healthy vigorous transplants should not require additional fertilizer until flowering and fruit set are well underway. At fruit set, plants can be side-dressed with nitrogen fertilizer every 4-6 weeks, following the instructions on the label. To side-dress, place fertilizer at the sides of the growing plants in shallow grooves or on the soil surface.

Harvesting Tips for Best Flavor—

For the best flavor, harvest when the tomatoes are at full color for the variety. Ripe tomatoes should be stored at 55-70°F to maintain their fresh, ripe flavor. Place harvested immature tomatoes in a shaded location to further ripen the fruit. Light is not needed to ripen immature tomatoes.

Adapted for use by the UC Master Gardeners of Yolo County by Ann Trump Daniel July 2015

ANR Publication 8159 GROWING TOMATOES IN THE HOME GARDEN, Pittenger, Garrison, Geisel, Unruh

Reviewed by Jennifer Baumbach, UC Master Gardener Program Coordinator

"It is the policy of the University of California (UC) and the UC Division of Agriculture & Natural Resources not to engage in discrimination against or harassment of any person in any of its programs or activities (Complete nondiscrimination policy statement can be found at <http://ucanr.edu/sites/anrstaff/files/169224.pdf>) Inquiries regarding ANR's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to Linda Marie Manton, Affirmative Action Contact, University of California, Davis, Agriculture and Natural Resources, One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616, (530) 752-0495."