

Tomatoes from Seed

Question: I'm thinking of growing tomatoes from seed. What do I need to know?

The first question to answer is "Why from seed?" Those vegetables which require many plants to make a serving like corn, beans and beets and those that do not transplant well like carrots obviously are better grown from seed. But most home gardeners only need a few tomato plants and the stores are full of nursery-grown seedlings. The best reason is the selection of plants. There are literally hundreds if not thousands of tomato varieties. If you have special requirements or just special tastes, seeds may be the only answer. They are also cheaper. For the price of a six pack you can purchase a packet of 25 to 50 seeds which will last three years if kept dry and cool. You can grow healthy seedlings which will be ready at exactly the right time for planting. And if you're like me, you love seeing a tiny seed in March become a six-foot plant loaded with tomatoes in September. *file32029r*

Growing tomatoes from seed is easy if you have the right equipment. I would suggest purchasing an inexpensive four-foot, two-tube fluorescent shop light under which you'll start the seedlings. You'll also need a simple timer to

turn your lights on and off. I also discovered that buying a commercial seed-starting medium with organic fertilizer included was a good investment. Look for a plastic dome which will fit over the common nursery flat. Once you've decided that growing from seed is for you, think about buying a heated mat for under your plastic flat.

All the information about planting is normally on the back of the seed pack. For tomatoes, the seeds should be started six to eight weeks before planting in the garden. I plant tomato transplants into the ground on May 1. So I start tomato seeds during the first two weeks of March. I plant the seeds 1/4 inch deep. The ideal temperature is 75 to 80 degrees so a heat mat would be an option. Make sure your planting mix is moistened before planting. Since I don't need many, I plant them directly in a large six pack, two to three seeds per cell, cover with a 1/4 inch of seedling mix and water gently. I then place them in a flat under the lights with the plastic dome over them to retain moisture. Make sure the lights are no more than six inches from the container and are on for sixteen hours a day. Once the plants appear in 7 to 14 days I remove the cover. *file32030r* As they grow, I remove all but one plant per cell. After six to eight weeks it's time to harden them off and plant them in the garden.

For more detailed information on starting from seed, see the California Master Gardener Handbook, published by the University of California. Garden help may be obtained by calling the ACMG hot line: 925-960-9420 or 510-639-1371.

David Blood

Master Gardener, 2001