



Determinate or Indeterminate—Choosing the Best Tomato for You and Your Garden

By Raymond Schoenwandt

UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

For those of us who love tomatoes, nothing tastes better than a home-grown tomato, whether you like red, yellow, purple or orange tomatoes. But with over seven hundred varieties in cultivation today, choosing ones that will grow well in your garden can be a frustrating task. It is important that you pick varieties that are suited to your garden.

Before we discuss choosing the best tomato for your garden, we need to define some of the confusing terms used to describe tomato plants. An heirloom tomato is any tomato that has been cultivated for at least fifty years and is not a hybrid. Heirloom tomatoes are pollinated by wind, rain or insects. If you save heirloom tomato seeds you will get the same tomato from the seeds in the next year. A hybrid tomato is a cross between two different varieties that have been selected for disease resistance, taste, shortened time to harvest, or improved fruit production. If you save the seeds of a hybrid you will not get the same tomato the next year. A determinate tomato, otherwise known as a bush tomato, is a smaller plant that will produce fruit in a shorter period of time. It produces one crop and then dies. Determinate tomatoes are used by commercial growers for sauces, soups, tomato paste and canned tomato products. An indeterminate tomato, otherwise known as a vine tomato, will produce fruit for the entire growing season until killed by frost. These are grown commercially for salads and the tomato on your burger. Finally, there is a semi-determinate variety that is actually a dwarf indeterminate plant. All three types can be either heirlooms or hybrids. No matter which type you choose, it is important to understand that determinate and indeterminate tomatoes have very different planting and pruning requirements.

May 29, 2019

Determinate tomatoes usually grow no higher than three to five feet. They are easy to grow, require minimal pruning, and are the best type for growing in a container. They have shorter planting-to-harvest periods and are the best choice for novice gardeners or those with very limited yard space, or for patio gardens. They are also the best for cold climate gardeners because they produce their entire crop within a few weeks. Determinate tomatoes require no staking and are usually grown in pots with tomato cages. Fruit production ends when flowers set on the very top branch of the plant. Pruning of determinate tomato plant should only be done between the ground and the very first branch at the bottom of the plant. Never prune the top branch of the plant as that will stop growth and limit fruit production. Aggressive pruning will lower the amount of fruit that will be produced by the plant. Determinate tomatoes are great to eat fresh and are the best for canning and freezing. Varieties of determinate tomatoes include Patio, Better Bush, Roma, San Marzano, Celebrity (sometimes considered semi-determinate) and Rutgers.

Indeterminate tomatoes can grow to a height of twelve feet and will require staking in order to support the plant. They will also require pruning in order to maximize fruit production; otherwise they continue growing new branches at the expense of producing fruit. To prune an indeterminate tomato, remove the suckers growing at a 45-degree angle at the point where the main branch attaches to the main stem. Suckers should be removed when they are small enough to be pinched off by hand without leaving a large scar on the branch. Varieties of indeterminate tomatoes include Black Cherry, Juliet, Brandywine, Cherokee Purple, Sungold, Mountain Magic, Pink Berkley Tie Dye, Black Prince, Big Beef, Early Girl and Amish Paste.

There are no Master Gardeners classes scheduled this weekend, but on Saturday, June 8, from 9:00 to 11:00, Master Gardeners will be holding their Second Saturday Open Garden Day at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, 6699 Campus Dr. in Placerville. Staff will be on hand to discuss irrigation in the home garden. The Succulent Garden will be open as well for questions and plant diagnosis.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512), or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.