

PLANT LAND

GREENHOUSES • NURSERY • GARDEN CENTER

Growing Tomatoes

Seed or Plants: Tomatoes can be started from seed or you can buy plants in spring. While starting them from seed is easy, the plants are always inexpensive and there are no huge advantages to seed. Buy plants before the end of May. Sow tomato seeds indoors 6-8 weeks before they will go outside, usually in March. Sow seeds in sterile starting mix in a flat to germinate. They should be in a warm spot and will germinate in about a week at 75°F or in two weeks at 60°F. Be sure to keep the plants away from gas ovens or heaters because tomatoes cannot tolerate natural gas. Seeds will show two leaves to start and in a short time should have 4 leaves. At this point you should transplant each seedling into a 4" pot. They are fragile so they must be handled gently. Plant them deeper than they were. Be attentive to seedlings and do not let them dry out.

Planting: As planting time approaches, both your seedlings and store bought plants will need hardening off. Hardening off toughens up tender plants that have only been indoors for being outdoors. One week before you plan to plant your tomatoes, set the pots outside in a spot sheltered from harsh sun and wind. Leave them out for a few more hours each day working up to leaving them out all day. Be sure to bring them in at night.

Tomatoes need a site with good sun for at least 6 hours a day. Like any garden plant, they want the best soil possible, one that is rich in nutrients and holds water without becoming soggy. Tomatoes also adapt readily to pots. The pot should be at least 18" deep and 16" wide. Use a rich mix. In the garden, tomatoes need spacing but it can vary from 2' to 4' apart depending on type.

When you plant your tomatoes, strip the lower leaves off so that only the top 4" of the plant has leaves left. Plant the tomato so that the entire length of bare stem is underground with only the top 4" above ground. Either bury it deeply or dig a trench and gently lay the plant on its side with the top 4" above ground. The plant will develop roots all along that bare stem. Tomatoes are about 85% water and the more roots a plant develops the more water it can take in.

Weather: When the plants are young, you must pay attention to weather reports. Any forecast for temperatures to dip below freezing, 32°F, will harm your plants. In Montana, we can get such weather late into June. If the temperature is forecasted for somewhere between 25-32°F, light protection like a sheet or plastic over the plants will work. Below 25°F can just be trouble. Cover the plants but be prepared for the possibility of losing them and having to start over.

Many products and strategies exist to allow northern gardeners to put tomatoes out before all danger of frost is past. Some desirable types simply need more growing days than we have. You can either start these types earlier and transplant them multiple times to bigger pots or you can set them out early and try to protect them. Protection methods include products such as Wall-O-Water® (a series of water filled tubes that surround the plant), cloches (covers made of everything from glass to wax paper), row cover fabric (a light weight fabric secured over the plant) and a myriad of homemade set ups that usually involve plastic, a support method and/or maybe a milk jug or two. When all is said and done, we can guarantee you will find a Montana gardener who sets their plants out after May 31st and has tomatoes at the same time as the more 'ambitious' gardeners.

Water & Fertilizer: Water the plants in well and be sure they get plenty of water all summer. Tomatoes are very heavy water consumers. The quality of your crop and the amount of yield will be directly related to the amount of water the plants get. If you have planted in rich soil, the plants should need no additional fertilizer applied. You can mulch tomato plants with grass clippings (chemical free) to keep the roots cool and moist.

Support & Pruning: Tomatoes need some kind of support to grow. Wire cages are sold for this or you can make your own. Cages encircle the plant and so provide good support. With other kinds of support you will need to tie the plants to the support since tomatoes do not attach themselves on their own. Use soft ties like strips of old nylons because the stems are easily damaged.

Whether or not to prune tomatoes as they grow is debated somewhat. We suggest that you do prune your plants. The growth habit of the particular variety you are growing will determine the amount of pruning necessary. Tomatoes called 'indeterminate' types usually need the most pruning while 'determinate' types need the least. 'Determinate' types grow to a specific height, produce flowers, then tomatoes and quit for the season. They tend to be stockier, bushier plants. 'Indeterminate' tomatoes have no limit (except the length of our season) on growth or production. They produce tomatoes until frost. They must have support as they tend to have sprawling growth. A limited sub group of indeterminate tomatoes called 'short internodes' have the desirable trait of season long production but on a smaller, stockier plant.

When the plants are young, they can be pruned to two main stems to increase fruit production. To prune tomatoes through the season, you must be able to identify what are called 'suckers' on the plant. Suckers appear first as a leaf

where a branch comes out from the main stem. These should be cleanly snapped off when they are about 2" long. Be careful not to damage the main stem. Suckers do not produce tomatoes so removing them means no energy will go into growing useless branches. Suckers will appear throughout the summer so plants need to be checked and pruned every week. You should also be tying the plant to its support if needed as it grows along. Don't allow the plant to become floppy and tangled.

Harvesting: Harvest tomatoes as they ripen. As the end of the growing season approaches, you will again need to tune into the weather forecasts. Tomatoes will not tolerate frost. Light protection is usually all that is needed. A sheet or plastic works fine but be sure to remove it during the day so the plants do not overheat and get needed direct sun for ripening. Once temperatures go into the low 20's at night, your tomatoes are done for the season.

Green tomatoes that won't turn before hard frosts can be ripened inside the house. Layer them in a box with sheets of newspaper and keep them in a warm spot. Keep one ripe one in the box at all times to provide gases the others need to ripen. Check them every 2-3 days and dispose of any tomatoes with any signs of rot. They usually ripen in a few weeks. The fresh flavor is somewhat diminished but they are perfect for canning, freezing or sauce.

Here are the tomato varieties we carry and a little about each: The number of days refers to from days from transplanting to harvest.

Baby LaRoma: Determinate. Higher yields of larger, tastier tomatoes on strong plants. Vigorous plants bear an abundance of 4 oz tomatoes. 76 days

Beefmaster: indeterminate, very large fruit, best for fresh eating. 80 days. Space 4' apart. 16-18 oz fruit.

Beefsteak: Indeterminate. Uniform shoulder color and consistently good taste. Grow staked, caged or as a bush type. 72 days; 10-14 oz size fruit

Better Boy: indeterminate, one of the most popular especially for fresh eating. 75 days. Space 4' apart. 16-18 oz. Fruit.

Big Boy: Indeterminate. Plant produces good yields of very flavorful 1 lb meaty tomatoes. Tomatoes turn bright red when mature. 78 days

Bush Early Girl: Determinate. Produces huge yields of 4" long red tomatoes. It is firm, meaty, flavorful. Great for salsa, salads, and cooking. 54 days. 6-8 oz. Fruit.

Celebrity: Determinate. High yields of 8 oz red tomatoes all season long until frost. Tomatoes are firm and flavorful and turn red when mature. 70 days.

Champion: indeterminate, bred especially for sandwich lovers. 62 days. Space 3' apart.

Early Girl: indeterminate, most popular and best known. Excellent for fresh eating. Short timer, only 60 days. Space 2' apart.

Gardener's Delight: Indeterminate. High yields of flavorful 1 ¼" size red cherry tomatoes continuously until frost. The tomatoes are very sweet and grow in clusters of 6 to 12. Excellent for salads or snacks. 65 Days.

Grape Red: Bright red small fruits are about 1/3 oz. Each. They are very sweet, bite sized, oval shaped grape tomatoes. Strong tolerance to heat, humidity and cracking. Determine bush habit. 58 days.

LaRoma III: determinate, elongated tomatoes specifically for sauce. Heavy crop on sturdy plants. 62 days. Space 3' apart.

Lemon Boy: indeterminate, small lemon yellow tomatoes. 72 days. Space 2' apart.

Old German: Indeterminate. Produces good yields of 2 lb golden-yellow tomatoes with red and pink stripes. One of the best slicing tomatoes on the market. 75 Days.

Patio: determinate, produces small fruit. Very compact plant, good for containers. 70 days. Space 2' apart.

Roma Paste: Determinate. Plant produces heavy yields of 3" long red plum shaped tomatoes. Tomatoes are flavorful and have very few seeds. One of the most popular varieties for paste, sauce, ketchup, and canning. 75 Days

San Marzano: Determinate. Produces good yields of 3 ½" bright red tomatoes. Very meaty. Excellent for making paste, sauce, puree, and canning. 80 Days.

Striped German: Indeterminate. Flat, medium to large, variably ribbed-shoulder tomatoes are shaded yellow and red. The marbled interior looks beautiful sliced. Complex, fruity flavor and smooth texture. 78 Days.

Small Fry: determinate, small red cherry tomato, very heavy yields. 65 days. Space 2' apart.

Sugary: Tiny, 5 oz. oval fruit with pointed ends. Semi-determinate. 85 days.

Sweet 100: indeterminate, extraordinary yields of tiny, smaller than cherry tomatoes. Very sweet. 65 days. Space 2' apart.

Tomatoberry: Indeterminate. These cherry tomatoes not only look unique, producing strawberry-shaped fruits, but also have a super-sweet taste and aroma. 1 oz fruit. 80 Days.

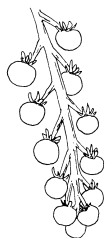
Valencia: Indeterminate. Produces good yields of 8 to 10 oz orange tomatoes. It is meaty and delicious with few seeds. The tomato has a sweet and tangy flavor. 76 Days. **(Heirloom)**

Windowbox Roma: Determinate. Produces high yields of 2 oz red pear shaped tomatoes. The tomatoes have excellent flavor and have extra long shelf life. Excellent for salads, and for making sauce and paste. 70 Days.

Yellow Pear: Indeterminate. High yields of small 1 oz pear shaped tomatoes. Tomatoes grow in cluster of 6 to 9 and turn yellow when mature. 70 Days.

Indeterminate: Indeterminate tomatoes are actually vines that continue growing in length throughout the growing season. Also referred to as "vining" tomatoes, indeterminate tomato varieties will also continue to set and ripen fruit until killed off by frost.

Determinate: Determinate tomatoes are varieties that grow to a fixed mature size and ripen all their fruit in a short period, usually about 2 weeks. Once this first flush of fruit has ripened, the plant will begin to diminish in vigor and will set little to no new fruit. Also, referred to as "bush" tomatoes.



Gardeners Delight
Small Fry
Sweet 100
Tomatoberry
Yellow Pear
1 - 2 Oz.



Baby LaRoma
Grape
Patio
3 - 4 Oz.



Roma
San Marzano
Windowbox Roma
2-4 Oz.



Bush Early Girl
Early Girl
Celebrity
Lemon Boy
6-8 Oz.



Ace
Beefsteak
Champion
Valencia
Striped German
10-14 Oz



Big Boy
Beefmaster
Better Boy
Old German
16-18 Oz.