



## Tomatoes, Peppers & Eggplant

*Three things tomatoes, peppers & eggplant have in common are:*

All three must be planted ahead of time inside to grow from seed and set out as plants.

All three are well suited to growing in pots.

All three like it hot, hot hot!!!

Knowing and paying attention to those three things makes growing tomatoes, peppers and eggplant here in the valley easy. They would rather grow in Mexico but you can fool them into thinking Montana is just as warm!

Our short growing season means that these three vegetables not only need to be put into the garden as plants but that when you start them from seed they need a little extra TLC. All three are easy to start but need extra heat to germinate. Their seeds get going best at a temperature of 75 or above. Use heat mats to provide a temperature boost plus germinate the seeds in a warm spot in the house. The easy part is that this is just for germination, once they have sprouted they will happily grown at temperatures in the 62 to 65 degree range and can be moved to a cooler location. Start all three at least nine weeks before our last frost date, meaning about the end of February is about the right time to start seeds and make sure you have big plants to set out.

Tomatoes, peppers and eggplant cannot be set outside until all danger of frost is past. That is unless you can protect them and keep them a few degrees warmer. Mini greenhouses, wall o' waters, milk jugs, you name it, here in Montana we use all of them to fool these plants into believing it is warm enough for them to be outside. Growing them in pots gives gardeners a real advantage here. In addition to being 'portable' (you can move them into garages when cold threatens) the soil in containers warms up faster than garden soil and the roots of tomatoes, peppers and eggplant appreciate the boost.

If you are planting them in the ground you will need to wait until the soil is at least 60 degrees and you will need to pay close attention to the weather report for cold snaps. Because the plants will be relatively small when cold is most likely to strike you can use overturned buckets to protect plants on cold nights. Be sure to remove the covers when the day warms up.

*Tomato tip: Plant tomato plants deep. Pinch off all but the top four or five leaves and plant the long stem deep in soil. For a container you can put it on the bottom and leave only the top 4-5 inches showing. In the garden you can lay the plant on its side and gently bend the top up at about 4-5 inches. Do NOT do this with peppers, eggplant or other garden plants. Tomatoes can produce roots from their stems and helping the plant to push a lot of root mass helps it to fruit productively and makes the tomatoes tastier.*

Tomatoes, peppers and eggplant all need lots of water all through their growing season. It is best to keep them evenly moist. If you allow plants to dry out between watering it can lead to conditions such as blossom end rot on tomatoes and small peppers or eggplant. During hot weather they appreciate a deep watering at least once a day and may need water twice a day when temperatures soar.

For fertilizing we recommend using a good organic product such as Happy Frog®. Apply it in light amounts to seedlings and generously to plants once they go outside. Follow the label directions.

Tomatoes, peppers and eggplant all need some kind of support for healthy growth. Just like with methods of providing heat, gardeners can get creative with support structures. You are trying to keep the plants upright to allow sunshine in to ripen fruit and to keep fruit up off the soil. Whatever you can come up with that accomplished those things is fine.

Tomatoes can be corralled with tomato cages. There are two types of tomato plants, determinate and indeterminate. Determinate varieties grow compactly, still needing support but typically not needing as much tying up. Indeterminate varieties have a more sprawling habit and need sturdy support combined with tying up and light pruning. Check tags for the type you are buying. One is not more productive than the other and you should chose based on taste and use.

Peppers and eggplant both need staking to support the weight of heavy fruit on slender stems. A simple bamboo stake next to the stem held with soft ties works fine. In containers it can be a good idea to put a good sized rock in the bottom before you put in soil to make the pot bottom heavy.

*Pepper tip: Keep pepper plants inside for as long as possible. They cannot set fruit without consistent temperatures above 70 degrees so when they are outside they get a minor setback every cool night. Keeping them as warm as possible helps them to start producing early and helps you get bigger peppers earlier. Peppers really benefit from a small greenhouse, even a simple one made from old windows.*

Be sure to give tomatoes, peppers and eggplants spots in the garden that get a lot of sun, 6-8 hours a day. While tomatoes will tolerate some shade, here in Montana we really have to keep them much warmer so ignore this advice if you see it.

As the growing season winds down you can prune off a fair number of tomato leaves to allow sun to ripen remaining fruit. If you have grown hot peppers and want to dry them, simply cut the stem at the base and hang the whole plant to dry. The longer peppers remain on the plant, the hotter they get. We won't ever grow supermarket size sweet peppers here but you can get good sized ones in a good year and the longer they can remain on the plant, the sweeter they will be. Red, orange or yellow sweet peppers are hard to grow in the open garden here and are best suited for greenhouse growing.

*Eggplant tip: New plants that are grafted varieties have proven to be a boon for Montana gardeners. These plants will produce fruit at a much lower temperature range than seed grown plants. For eggplant this is a huge advantage and allows the fruit to get much larger. For either type of plant, pinch off all but 3-4 eggplant per plant to allow remaining ones to get bigger.*

Plant Land grows 70 varieties of tomatoes, 30 kinds of peppers and two kinds of eggplant. We have plants for every gardener including a great selection of heirlooms. Even if you grow your own plants from seed, stop by and see if we can tempt you with an additional plant or two.

Happy gardening!!