

Tomato Tips from Topmost

Heirloom tomatoes are no more difficult to grow than those hybrid “big” tomatoes, so if you’re going to expend the effort, why not grow the best? This is all about great taste.

First, a few terms: Tomatoes are classified as determinate or indeterminate, and most tomatoes are **indeterminate**. This simply means the plant keeps on growing until frost kills it. By the end of August I usually pick off any new flowers, since they will never have enough time to mature into tomatoes, and the energy is better used by the plant to ripen the green tomatoes already on the vine. **Determinate** means that the plant will grow to a particular height, produce its crop of tomatoes and die. These plants are usually best suited for container growing or small-space gardens. **Shoulders** refers to the very top of the tomato (picture a head atop the tomato) and “**catfacing** on the shoulders” just means that the top of the tomato has not-so-pretty striations that are brown and dry. Definitely not pretty, but certainly not harmful, and some tomatoes are prone to it. Heirlooms are known for their taste, and beauty is secondary.

There are differing opinions on the disease resistance of heirlooms. Some claim that they are often more susceptible to diseases, others say that generations of growing have produced plants highly adaptable and disease resistant. Crop failures can be attributed to many factors; under- or over-watering, excessive heat or cold, poor soil fertility, and my favorite – the whims of nature.

The two **most important things** to offer your tomato plants are a place in the **sun** and good, rich soil. Tomatoes are greedy feeders and will appreciate growing in soil fortified with compost or composted manure. Soil testing before planting is always a good idea, and kits and directions are available from any local University of Connecticut Extension Service office, for a small fee.

Feed the soil and it will reward you by producing healthy plants. Beware of fertilizers with a high nitrogen content, or you will end up with spectacularly lush leaves, and no tomatoes. While you’re at it, why not grow **organically**? Chemicals and pesticides can leach into the water supply, they are often known carcinogens, and they are harmful to beneficial insects. Yes, there are good bugs and bees, and all those magnificent butterflies...and let’s not forget the fact that it’s probably a good idea not to put poison on something you plan to eat. There is an ever-growing supply of organic amendments at most garden centers, as well as dehydrated manures and **compost**. Consider making your own compost and stockpiling leaves in the fall.

Indeterminate heirloom tomato plants are robust growers, and will definitely need **support** during the growing season. Wire cages are usually not large enough or strong enough. Wooden stakes may be purchased at most garden centers or home centers and, hard to believe when looking at a new little tomato plant, but you’ll need the stakes to be 6 feet tall and about 1 or 2 inches wide. Put the stakes in first, either one for each plant to be tied against, or one between each plant so that twine can be woven in front and behind each plant. Growing against a fence or trellis also works well; have lots of twine on hand for tying them. Space the plants about 2 feet or more apart.

My favorite **planting** method is to dig a trench about 12” deep in front of each tomato stake, throw in a shovelful of compost, and lay the plant in on its side. I water it well and push soil against the plant so that the stem is straight up against the pole and the part of the plant above ground begins with the first set of leaves, which I then remove. Leaving the soil slightly depressed assures that water will percolate into the roots rather than running off. Then I add a generous amount of my favorite ally, **mulch**. This will keep the weed population down, keep the soil temperature even, and prevent soil from splashing up onto the leaves during watering or

rainstorms, preventing some of the more common tomato diseases. I use hay or last fall's leaves to a depth of about 6 inches, and by fall cleanup time, any mulch that hasn't decomposed is left to do so during the winter. Yes, hay contains weed seeds, but if it's applied thickly enough they don't get a chance to sprout. Any weeds that do appear usually are easily pulled by hand, since the mulch keeps the soil soft, and this method eliminates the need for hoeing, which often damages the tomato's fine feeder roots. Many farms and garden centers sell mulch hay, and it's usually cheaper than regular hay.

Tomatoes appreciate consistent **watering**, and the soil should remain slightly moist, but never soggy. Blossom end rot is usually caused by under-watering. Never use overhead watering in the late afternoon or evening. Tomato plants that go into the night with wet leaves invite fungus diseases. Drip irrigation is ideal, and hand watering even better, since it affords the opportunity to look the plants over, and to chat with them while you're there.

Once established, tomato plants produce leaves abundantly. I remove the **suckers** so that more energy can be focused on producing tomatoes. Suckers are the stems that grow out of the crotch formed by a branch and the main stem, and are easy to pinch off when they are just forming.

Deer love tomatoes. One spring they browsed my whole tomato patch in the evening and topped every plant. I now use an arsenal of 3 different sprays to repel them. They become accustomed to any particular spray over time, so rotation is important. If you visit your tomato patch one day and notice that plants are missing leaves, look very closely for tomato **hornworms**. They are the exact color of a tomato plant stem, are about the size of my little finger, and have voracious appetites. I pick them off and take them to the middle of the hayfield and tell them not to return, so I only get one or two a season. They are often parasitized by a tiny wasp, evidenced by white egg sacs along the worm's back. They will eventually kill the worm, but he can eat a lot of tomato leaves before he dies. Tomato leaves have the very important duty of shielding the tomatoes from sunburn.

Consider planting some basil near your tomatoes. It is believed that basil repels some of the insects that love to snack on tomato leaves. **Basil** is an ideal partner for tomatoes, both fresh and cooked. Topmost offers many varieties of basil plants during the season. When cooking tomato sauce, add fresh basil during the last 5 minutes of cooking. Lengthy cooking turns basil bitter, as it develops tannins. Finely chop fresh basil leaves to sprinkle on tomato slices, or use whole leaves in tomato sandwiches and forget the lettuce.

Tomatoes are best enjoyed picked fresh from the vine and eaten standing in the garden on a lovely late summer day. They are best kept and served at **room temperature**. A salad of heirloom tomatoes is a visual extravaganza as well as a taste treat. Use them in sauces, salads, sandwiches, salsa fresca or just plain sliced. My Italian friends enjoy them sliced fresh and served with a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil. I prefer them thickly sliced, between slices of whole wheat bread liberally slathered with mayonnaise, with the addition of a slice of Ailsa Craig onion, fresh from the garden. Tomato sauce freezes beautifully and whole canned tomatoes are easy to do. The possibilities as well as the enjoyment are endless!

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