

## **Tomato Tips from Topmost**

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 the best idea, and kits and directions are available from any local University of Connecticut Extension Service office, for a small fee. Beware of fertilizers with a high nitrogen content, or you will end up with spectacularly lush leaves, and no tomatoes.

Chemicals and pesticides can leach into the water supply, they are often known carcinogens, they are harmful to beneficial insects, and it makes good sense not to put poison on anything 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 – your soil will be healthier, and grow healthier plants.

Indeterminate heirloom tomato plants are robust growers, and will definitely need support of some sort 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, just have lots of twine on hand for tying them. Space the plants about 2 feet or more apart.

My favorite method is to dig a trench about 12" deep in front of each tomato stake, throw in a shovelful of compost and sometimes an eggshell or two for calcium. The plant is laid on its side and soil pushed against it so that the stem is straight up against the pole. Leaving a slight depression around the plant assures that water will percolate into the roots, rather than running off. The part of the plant above ground should begin with the first set of leaves, which are usually best removed.

Mulching for a depth of 4 to 6 inches assures that the soil temperatures remain even, most weeds are suppressed and soil will not splash up against the plants helping to prevent disease. Leaves or mulch hay work just fine.

Tomatoes appreciate consistent watering and the soil should remain slightly moist, but never soggy. 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.

Once established, tomato plants produce leaves abundantly. I remove 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. Tomatoes can sunburn easily, so don't remove too many leaves above each fruit.

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