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Tomato Growing FAQ's

Are there different types of tomato leaves?

Yes, There are two leaf types, Regular (RL) & Potato Leaf (PL) and there are also leaf variations for both types, (Rugose-a darker green rough-surfaced leaf, or Angora--a fuzzy, hairy type regular leaf.)

Regular Leaf is the most typical leaf type with leaf edges that are serrated. There are many variations in terms of size of leaf and leaf color with various shades of green or green-blue tint. Some leaves are very narrow and are sometimes called dissected because they look like a saw tooth cut them.

Potato Leaf usually has fewer cuts or serrations on the leaf edge. Sometimes there are a few large notches in the mostly smooth leaf edge.

What's the difference between "indeterminate" and "determinate" tomatoes?

Determinate tomatoes, or "bush" tomatoes, are varieties that grow to a compact height (generally 1-1.5m). Determinates stop growing when fruit sets on the top bud. All the tomatoes from the plant ripen at approximately the same time (usually over period of 1- 2 weeks). They require a limited amount of staking for support and are perfectly suited for container planting.

Indeterminate tomatoes will grow and produce fruit until killed by frost. They can reach heights of up to 4 meters although 2m is normal. Indeterminate will bloom, set new fruit and ripen fruit all at the same time throughout the season. They require substantial staking for support.

Should I prune or not prune tomato suckers?

Never prune a 'determinate' type tomato. You want all the fruit you can get from these shorter plants. Indeterminate varieties vary in their response to pruning, some reportedly have increased yields when the young plant is pruned back to three or four vines. I prefer to let the plant produce stems for better fruit production and better leaf canopy to protect the fruit from sunscald.

However, I like to remove most of the suckers at the bottom 10" of the plant to invite greater air flow at the base of the plants and reduce the risk that fruit will touch the ground where they insects and disease might be encouraged. Know that removing new flowers near the end of the growing season can help speed up the ripening of mature fruit.

Is pruning necessary at all?

Pruning is not necessary at all. However, if you want taller plants or huge fruits you will need to prune excess vines that start to form where the leaf meets the main stem.

It turns out that different tomato cultivars vary in their response to sucker removal. For some, light pruning (removing the first four suckers) results in the greatest yield; for others, no pruning gives the highest yield. Experiment with your favorite variety.

What is the best spacing for my tomato plants?

Indeterminate Heirloom tomato plants can get really big (generally 2m tall and 1-1.5m wide). If you are planting the same variety in a row, I suggest spacing your plants 3' apart. If you are using a circular wire trellis I suggest 4'-5' apart. Determinate plants can be planted 2' apart. You'll want to separate different varieties by at least 8'.

What's the difference between a regular tomato and an heirloom tomato?

For the past 40 years or so, when most people spoke of "regular" tomatoes they meant hybrid tomatoes because these were the most commonly available in markets and seed catalogues. Hybrid tomatoes are genetically created for a particular purpose the marketing and distribution interests (i.e., thick skins so they can withstand the weight of huge amounts of tomatoes stacked in a truck, a longer shelf-life so they might last a week or longer at the market, or a particular disease resistance). Too often a hybrid's last priority has been taste. That said, there are some fine tasting hybrid tomatoes that have a loyal following. Like many gardeners, I only grew hybrid tomatoes BEFORE discovering the superior flavors of heirloom tomatoes. Heirloom tomatoes are open-pollinated tomatoes, whose seeds have been handed down from generation to generation. They are generally thin-skinned, extremely flavorful and have a natural resistance to disease.

Can I save the seeds from hybrid tomatoes?

Yes. However, you will not get a tomato like the parent. If you want to have fruit that is identical to the fruit you are seeding, you need to do so from an open-pollinated or heirloom tomato. One of the primary reasons that heirloom tomatoes are so popular is because after finding a favorite heirloom tomato variety, you can save the seeds of that variety for many generations to come.

Why are heirloom tomatoes so 'ugly'?

Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. When I hear this comment it generally comes from someone who has only experienced the classic red, round, clear-skinned tomato. Heirloom

tomatoes come in many 'strange' shapes, colors and sizes. They can also have markings that some might consider less-than-perfect or unattractive (cat-facing, concentric cracking, zipper or stitching lines, green shoulders) or deep folds or fluting. I like to point out to heirloom tomato novices that the wonderful diversity of physical features possible in the many varieties of heirloom tomatoes, are, like in people, a blessing. In fact, many of the colors and shapes of some heirloom tomatoes are more reminiscent of jewels. And behind the face of these wonderful diverse looking heirlooms, is the TASTE that will forever change how you think of a tomato.

What can I do to get my kids to like tomatoes?

Introduce them a tomato that has something to be excited about in the taste. Most kids have never tasted a tomato with taste. I would start them out with some of the sweeter cherry tomatoes. (Snow White, Isis Candy Cherry, Blondkopfchen, Camp Joy, Black Cherry, Yellow Pear) Offer them several kinds so they can distinguish the flavor differences and select favorites. Try have them grow their own tomatoes and appreciate some of their own harvest.

What does "days to maturity" mean?

This is the number of days from transplanting your seedlings in the garden until the first appearance of mature fruit. With all of my all my tomato descriptions on tomatofest.com I have ("Days 65")

Is the tomato a fruit or a vegetable?

Generally I respond to this question with, "What do you think it is? And regardless of what they answer I say, "You're right." It's a fruit, botanically speaking because it develops from a botanical ovary that contains the egg cells. According to the government, it's classified as a vegetable so it can be taxed for additional revenues. If you have a bet going with a friend, say "it's a fruit" to win.

What kind of tomatoes are best for canning?

Tomatoes with flavor. Although medium-sized, higher acid, red tomatoes have most often been used for canning, any colored tomato is suitable if sufficient acid (citric acid or lemon juice) is added to make up for the sweeter (low-acid) varieties. I love to chop a selection of different colored tomatoes or select a blend of yellow varieties or can variety-specific tomatoes.

What tomatoes best for container planting?

I used to grow almost all my tomatoes in containers around the house. You really can grow any variety in a container as long as the container is large enough for adequate nourishment, water, root growth and is available to sunlight. The larger your planter is the better. Staking opportunities for your plants in containers are limited especially if your planter surface is a solid patio. Under these circumstances, I've used stakes into the planter soil and where possible I tie the stems from above (roof eave, patio above if you are in an apartment, etc.) Planting determinate

and semi-determinate tomato varieties offer less of a challenge since they don't need much, if any, staking. See my [determinate varieties](#). Generally, medium to smaller fruited varieties are better suited to container planting. Most important is to make sure your containers have a good amount of sunlight.

To mulch or not to mulch my tomato plants?

I believe in mulching. The benefits have been proven. Warms the soil, holds moisture in soil and keeps back weeds. I prefer plastic mulch (regardless of whether clear, black or red) to organic mulch.

Bugs and Garden Pests:

How do I get rid of Stink Bugs and leaf Footed Bugs?

Here are a couple of links that you may find helpful.

[Durham Extension Master Gardeners
Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of California](#)

I have a problem with squirrels. They have been eating up my tomatoes.

If they are only eating your ripe fruit you can try harvesting your tomatoes earlier than full ripeness to complete the ripening indoors. You might also try providing the squirrels a source of water to access away from your tomato plants. Other than that you might have to provide your tomatoes a physical barrier against these pests like a netting. Or resort to live trapping the beasts and moving them away.

What can I do organically to prevent pests like hornworms attacking my tomatoes in the hot and humid area of South Florida? Also, how can I reduce the fungal issues that are common here in Florida?

Firstly, if you are not able to manage the hornworms or caterpillars by picking them off by hand (by the way, chickens love them) then BT, which is an organic pesticide that uses the natural pathogenic bacteria bacillus thuringiensis, (thus the name BT) will kill the critters before they are big enough to eat your plants. The BT is eaten and the BT cells germinate inside the pest causing death in a few days. Larger caterpillars, like the hornworm, should be sprayed with BT for it to work.

Using a mulch will help prevent fungal issues by keeping the soil off the lower leaves. Also, water your plants only at the base of the plants not wetting the leaves. It is advisable to keep the lower leaves as dry as possible by opening up space between the plants for adequate air flow. If you do find any blemished or damaged lower leaves remove them so the spores don't spread to the surrounding leaves. I personally do not spray my plants but if you wish to then a copper

spray is a standard organic fungal remedy. Once a fungal problem is identified it is best to respond as soon as possible before spreading of the problem occurs.

I live in the high mountain country. What tomato varieties are best suited for me?

There are many tomato choices available to you that are better suited to your shorter season and cooler climate. Seek those shorter season varieties with early maturity dates (50-65 days) Azoychka, Sasha's Altai, Early Wonder and Buckbee's New 50 day to name a few.

I just moved to Florida from cold country. What tomatoes do well here?

Florida can be wonderful for growing tomatoes. However your different growing conditions (hot & humid) will offer you different considerations in your tomato growing. Best to plan the starting dates for your tomatoes so that you have flowering before or after the most humid and hottest part of your season. Remember that it takes approximately two months from seed to putting out your tomatoes and another two months for getting ripe tomatoes. Here are a few varieties that I've found successful for the hot/humid area you are in: Arkansas Marvel, Atkinson, Creole, Florida Pink, Homestead 24, Neptune, Tropic.

I have fur on the tomatoes of some of my plants. Is this unusual?

Some tomato varieties do have a light fuzz on the fruit and some have this fuzz on the fruit and the plants. Some varieties have a light fuzz on the fruit when the fruit is young but then this disappears when the fruit ripens. There are varieties where this fuzziness is true to type and preferred, like Garden Peach and Wapsipinicon, which are both delightful and full of delicious flavors.

Are cherry tomatoes good to grow for making a sauce?

Well, you can make a sauce out of cherry tomatoes. However, generally cherry tomatoes are NOT suggested for making a good sauce because there are too many seeds and too much gel to the fruit, and not sufficient flesh. The best tomato varieties to grow for making the best sauce is a good paste tomato variety, like any of the San Marzano varieties, Amish Paste, or Long Tom. A favorite of mine is San Marzano Redorta.

I am unable to find access to a couple hybrid tomato varieties that my family considered favorites in my youth. Do some hybrid tomatoes just become unavailable over time?

The parents of any hybrid tomato are proprietary and owned by the company that has created the hybrid. Any hybrid may be discontinued or replaced by an 'improved' hybrid over time due to its lack of popularity and therefore no longer available to purchase or grow. (Unless you find some older saved seed.)

What purple or red tomato would be best for growing in containers in the hot and humid South?

You can grow ANY tomato in a container. It's about the size of the container to suit what kind of tomato. For tall, indeterminate tomato varieties you should select at least a 10 gallon pot (15 gallon a better choice). And for determinate, shorter varieties or dwarf tomato varieties a 5 gallon pot would be ok. For a tall-growing purple, a good choice would be Cherokee Purple, Paul Robeson or Black From Tula. For a shorter purple: Black Sea Man or Pride of Flanders. For a tall growing red, Brandywine, OTV, Aussie, Good Old fashioned Red. For a shorter red there are many: Aurora, Bison, Bush Beefsteak, Sophie's Choice and Tiny Tim are good choices.

My father likes the more robust acidic varieties of tomato. What is a tomato with a real bite of acid to its flavor?

To respond to the acidic quality of a tomato requires some explanation. My dear friend and Craig LeHoullier, Author of Epic Tomatoes, probably explained it best.

"Some decades ago the USDA ran a large scale test on hundreds of tomato varieties - a selection of different colors, shapes and sizes. Turns out that the pH range (true acidity levels) of tomatoes runs in a very, very narrow range - they essentially are all "acidic" (the pH tends to be in the 4.1-4.2 range or so), but the perceived acidity (how that acid comes across, or not) varies widely - which is why tomatoes are described as running very tart/acidic to very sweet/mild, even to bland. What DOES vary widely in tomatoes are sugar levels. As with wines, higher sugar levels mask acidity, and the flip side hold true of course - low sugar levels allow the acidity to show." So what your father is seeking is a tomato with low sugar levels?low enough to let the acidity to show some boldness. And you can find this regardless of the color of the tomato. For example, Reds: Good Old fashioned Red, Andrew Rahart's Jumbo Red, Rutgers. Blacks: Paul Robeson, Black Prince, Black From Tula. Yellow/Orange: Amish Gold, Azoychka, Flamme, Aunt Gertie's Gold. Striped: Green Zebra, Black Zebra.

It's important to remember that taste is subjective and can be very different from person to person. The same variety might be considered sweet to one person or slightly acidic to another.

Aside from the personal perception of sweetness of each person there is the scientific level of sweetness to each tomato measured in brix. (1 degree brix equals 1 gram of sucrose dissolved in 100 grams of solution, therefore the higher level of the brix, the more dissolved sugar, resulting in a sweeter flavor.)

On the whole, most tomatoes are well-balanced between sweet and acidic. However, many of the white varieties are sweeter and may appear as bland tasting because the sweetness overshadows the acid.

Are the green tomato varieties considered sweet tomatoes or tart tomatoes?

They can be either sweeter, yet balanced, (like Green Giant, Aunt Ruby's Green, or Cherokee Green) or lower in sugars and therefore have a citric tartness to them (like Green Zebra and Green Grape).

Can you generalize whether a tomato will taste sweeter or tart by the color of the tomato?

Generally not, because all tomato colors can have a range of sugar content. I used to think the red, purple and black tomatoes had the biggest boldest, most acidic flavors but I've found the same quality in every color, with exception of most of the whites.

What are the terms most often used to describe tomato flavors?

I generally use the following: I compare: sweetness to tartness (or acidic), complex to simple, fullness to bland. I use the descriptions: mild, moderate and intense/bold or robust. I also, at times, might make an attempt to describe nuances I might pick up: earthy, chocolaty, spicy, fruity, citrusy but at different times for the same varieties I might also contradict my prior nuance descriptors. I too am subjective and able to be influenced by soil or fertilizer differences and even emotions. (As an example, at a tomato tasting I met a man who was seeking a tomato that would be boldly delicious and sweet as the tomato his grandfather used to grow when he was a kid. I advised him that he would most likely never find a tomato that sweet and bold in flavor because of how much he cherished his grandfather.)