

TOMATO PRODUCTION TIPS



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Frequently Asked Questions About Growing Tomatoes

Q: When buying transplants at local nurseries or garden centers, what is the best method of selecting the best transplants?

A: The first step is to make sure that you select the right variety of tomato that is adapted and tested for your area. Second, look for plants that appear healthy, uniformly dark green in color, and do not have any streaks, spots or holes in the leaves. The ideal tomato or pepper transplant should be just about as wide as it is tall. Avoid tall, spindly plants as much as possible.

Q: My tomato plants look great. They are dark green, vigorous and healthy. However, the flowers are not forming any fruit. What is the problem?



A: Several conditions can cause tomatoes to fail to set fruit. Too much nitrogen fertilizer, high nighttime temperatures (over 70° F), low temperatures (below 50° F), irregular watering, insects, such as thrips, and planting the wrong variety may result in poor fruit set. Any one of these by itself can cause poor fruit set and/or distorted fruit, but combinations can be even more damaging.

Q: What causes some of my early tomato fruit from the spring garden to be oddly shaped and generally of poor quality?



A: This misshaped fruit is usually caused by low temperatures during bloom and pollination. Fruit that set when temperatures are 55° F or below often are odd-shaped and of poor quality. The flowers that these tomatoes develop from often were abnormal due to these temperature conditions which result in abnormal, odd-shaped fruit with very little seed.



Q: What causes tomatoes to crack and is there anything I can do to prevent it?

A: Cracking is a physiological disorder caused by soil moisture fluctuations. When the tomato reaches the mature green stage and the water supply to the plant is reduced or cut off, the tomato will begin to ripen. At this time, a cellophane-like wrapper around the outer surface of the tomato becomes thicker and more rigid in order to protect the tomato during and after harvest. If the water supply is restored after the ripening process begins, the plant will resume translocation of nutrients and moisture into the fruit. This will cause the fruit to enlarge, which, in turns, splits the wrapper around the fruit and results in cracking. The single-best control for cracking is to assure that the water supply is constant and regular. However, be careful not to over water. It is helpful to apply a layer of mulch at the base of the plant. This serves as a buffer and helps prevent soil moisture fluctuation. Water your plants thoroughly each week. This is especially important when the fruits are maturing. Some varieties are resistant to cracking, but unfortunately, their yield and quality are generally less than other varieties.

Q: Should you allow tomatoes to become fully ripe and red on the vine before harvesting?

A: Generally, yields can be increased by harvesting the fruit at first blush of pink rather than leaving them on the plant to fully ripen. Contrary to popular belief, a tomato picked at first sign of color and ripened at room temperature will be just as tasty as those left to fully mature on the vine. Another advantage of picking tomatoes before they turn full red is that damage from birds, insects, and fruit cracking will be lessened.



Q: If tomatoes are picked green or before they are fully mature, how should they be handled to insure proper ripening and full flavor?

A: Tomatoes picked immature should never be refrigerated. They should be placed in a single layer and exposed to indirect sunlight at room temperature. When they are fully ripe, they should be placed in the refrigerator where they can be stored for several weeks. Those handled in this manner should be of great quality and great flavor.

INSECTS

Q: My tomato fruit have small yellow specks on their surface. When peeled, those yellow specks form a tough spot which must be cut off before eating the tomatoes. What's wrong?

A: Your problem is not of a varietal origin. The yellow speckling which you are seeing is caused by sucking insects. Early control of sucking insects which feed on the fruit is necessary if this problem is to be avoided.



Q: We planted tomatoes in our small garden. They are loaded and are the best tomatoes we have ever had; however, there are some small holes near the stem end of the tomato. When we cut the tomato open, there is a small worm inside. What is it and what can we do?

A: You have been invaded by the Tomato Pinworm. They usually do not damage the fruit until the infestation is quite severe. They normally show up on the leaves first. They can be controlled only by a preventative insecticide spray every 7 to 10 days. When the damage is evident, it is too late to do anything about it.

Q: How often should my tomato plants be fertilized?

Tomatoes are heavy feeders of fertilizers, so you will need to fertilize them for optimum production. Fertilizer should be applied to the garden and worked in 5 to 7 days before planting. Sandy soils should be fertilized with a complete fertilizer such as 8-24-24 or 8-8-8 at the rate of 3-4 pounds per 100 feet of row. If your soil is high in fertility reduce this rate to one-half. Apply an additional side dressing of fertilizer after the fruit of the first flower clusters are about the size of a golf ball. Additional fertilizer can be applied every two to three weeks. Approximately one to two level tablespoons of a complete fertilizer broadcast at the base of the plant and worked or watered in should be sufficient. If using a fertilizer high in nitrogen such as ammonium nitrate, reduce the rate to about one level tablespoon per plant.

