

Diana Webster's Tomato Growing Tips

I am trying an experiment this year. I have a waist high vegetable bed and have successfully grown cucumbers letting them hang down instead of training them up so will try it with tomatoes and see what happens. Yours sincerely

Diana Webster

GROWING THE BEST TOMATOES EVER!

Tomatoes are a warm season crop originally from South America so in our cooler climate we need to tweak a few things for success.

Sow your fresh seed or seeds from last year into jiffy pots or small multi celled punnets in seed in raising mix. Start this in August or early September, raise the soil moist but not wet keep the warm tray putting it on a waterproof tray on top of the fridge at the back, or on a hot water bottle {frequently replaced with hot water} cover with cling wrap and keep the heat in tomatoes.

Germinate at minimum soil temperature of 15 degrees c - in six to fourteen days.

Meanwhile prepare your planting site. Full sun please! Add well decomposed animal manure to the soil, or pelleted organise manure and some lime...

Tomatoes like an alkaline soil – this also prevents ‘blossom end rot’ a disease cause by lack of calcium or erratic watering (the base of the tomato goes brown and leathery).

If your tomatoes are growing too large for their punnets pop them on into potting mix in small pots.

Sometimes if they are growing well, they will start to flower - that is fine.

Transplant your ‘babies’ later October /early November (Melbourne Cup Day) into their final beds planting them deep into the soil.

Plant 50-60cm apart for most varieties, and insert a stake at time of planting (this prevents damaging the roots later)

Mulch well using pea straw, hay, sugar cane mulch or similar to prevent weeds and keep the soil moist (5cm layer)

As the plants grow remove the side shoots growing in the axil of the leaf and stem and tie to the stake with a figure of 8 support - using stretchy material like pantyhose or plant tie material or even old t shirts cut into 2.5 cm widths.

Traditionally only two main shoots are trained the main leader and the shoot below the first truss if flowers (the strongest) apart from determined varieties (more about that below)

Tomatoes are self-pollinating (males and female flowers together) and will help pollination, so gently shake your plants if there has been little wind for a few days (unlikely here at the coast)

In hot weather it may be necessary to water daily, preferably in the morning and at root level, while under cool conditions once a week maybe sufficient. If the days are hot (over 35 degrees) it may be necessary to throw an old sheet or similar over the tomatoes during the day to prevent sun scald. Pick when lightly coloured, red, yellow, purple depending on the variety or leave to ripen on the bush. At the end of the season when it is too cool for the fruit to ripen pull up the plant roots and all and hang upside down on the veranda or in the shed where the fruit will continue to ripen.

A few notes on determinate and indeterminate varieties – you will meet these words sometime in your tomato growing life.

Determinate varieties only grow to a certain height i.e., their height is determined.

Indeterminate varieties as the name suggests will grow indeterminately or forever.

There are a few of the hundreds of varieties available in Australia

Early tomatoes

Ida Gold Dwarf no staking, determinate, orange egg sizes when ripe. 62 days from transplant.

TOMMY TOE red apricot Fruits very good flavour indeterminate - 72 days from transplant. Will fruit from January to May.

ROUGE DE MARMANDE earliest medium red indeterminate prodigious yielder 77 days from transplant

ROMA red oval fruit which ripens over a short period, good for cooking and saucing

GROSSE LISSE the Australian standard indeterminate medium size round red fruit -86 days from transplant.