



Growing Tomatoes in the Home Garden

Tomatoes may be the most popular crop grown in Sonoma County home and community food gardens. With the right variety selection for your microclimate plus proper planting and cultural care, gardeners and their families can enjoy delicious tomatoes throughout the summer and into fall.

1. Can I grow tomatoes in my yard?

Tomatoes require 6 to 8 hours of sun a day. If you don't have that much sun, consider planting in containers in a sunnier location.

2. Should I grow tomatoes from seeds or purchased seedlings?

Many home gardeners prefer to purchase seedlings for their vegetable gardens. Purchase plants that are about 6- to 8-inches tall, stocky and well covered with healthy green leaves. Ideally, tomatoes should be outdoors in the sheltered sun one week before planting. For gardeners who wish to plant seeds, see ANR Publication 8159, [öGrowing Tomatoes in the Home Garden,ö](#) for more information.

3. When should I plant my tomatoes?

Plant after frost danger is past, soil has warmed and nighttime temperatures are in the 50s. Sonoma County has many microclimates. In warmer areas of the county, tomatoes usually can be planted earlier than in cooler growing areas. In the cooler areas of Sonoma County, look for tomatoes with an early date of maturity, for example, 50 to 60 days to ripen.

4. What is the difference between öheirloomö and öhybridö tomatoes?

Hybrid tomatoes are cross bred from two or more different plants. If hybrid seeds are planted, the resulting plants may not replicate the original. Heirlooms are open-pollinated which means that their seeds can be saved and the new plants will replicate the original plant.

5. What is the difference between öindeterminateö and ödeterminateö tomatoes?

Indeterminate tomatoes will continue to grow and produce fruit until the first frost. These tomato plants grow quite large and need support such as staking or caging. Determinate tomatoes grow to a certain size and stop, and often fruit ripens over a short period of time. These plants usually are bushier, shorter and may not need additional support.

6. How should I plant my tomatoes?

Dig a hole deep enough so that the plant shows only the top 3 inches of foliage. New roots will form along the buried stem that has been stripped of its foliage. Before planting, fill the hole with water and add compost to the hole. You also may add a well-balanced organic fertilizer, such as 7-5-7 (these numbers refer to the Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium content of the fertilizer). Follow the directions on the package.

Place the seedling gently in the hole, fill in with the soil and press firmly around each plant so that a slight depression is formed for holding water. Water thoroughly to settle the soil and eliminate any air pockets around the

roots. Provide support for the new tomato plant by staking or caging each plant. Mulch around each plant with 3 to 4 inches of organic material such as rice straw, leaves or compost.

Place plants 18 to 24 inches apart for determinate tomatoes and 24 to 36 inches apart for indeterminate tomatoes.

7. How can I keep my tomato plants healthy?

Disease-resistant tomato plants are less likely to succumb to common tomato diseases. Many will be labeled with letters such as VFN which indicates *Verticillium* wilt, *Fusarium* wilt and nematode resistance. For more information, refer to ANR Publication 8159, [Growing Tomatoes in the Home Garden](#) or [UC IPM Pest Management Guide: Tomato](#).

8. How do I water tomatoes and how often?

Even watering is very important. Keep water away from the foliage. For hand watering, water once or twice a week. First, check for moisture; if the soil is damp 2- to 3-inches deep, there is no need for watering. The length of time you run a drip system will depend on the output of your emitters and how many days per week you run your system. During an average Sonoma County summer, plants will need 1 inch of water over the surface area per week which is about 2/3 gallon of water per square foot.

9. How do I continue to care for my tomatoes?

As plants mature and set fruit, reduce the water. When green fruit begins to develop, you may wish to fertilize once or twice with diluted fish emulsion or spread compost on the soil around the base of the plant. It is important to maintain 3 to 4 inches of organic mulch throughout the growing season.

10. How do I care for my garden bed after harvest?

Remove the tomato plants, and put them into your compost pile or green waste can. The roots of healthy plants may remain in the soil where they will decompose with minimum soil disturbance. Remove plant and weed debris and leave the soil covered with mulch for the fall and winter or plant a cover crop. You may wish to spread compost or well-rotted manure on top of your mulch 6 to 8 weeks before planting time.

For help with your garden problems, call the Master Gardener hotline at 565-2608 or visit the Master Gardener information desk in the University of California Cooperative Extension office (133 Aviation Blvd., #109, Santa Rosa), or ask a Master Gardener at your local farmers market or the Sonoma County Fair or other event. See our website at <http://ucanr.edu/sites/scmg/> for additional publications.

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