

Yvonne's Guide to Growing Tomatoes

Tomatoes are a really easy vegetable to grow. They produce a good crop that will surpass the taste of any tomatoes you can pick up at the supermarket. They are also one of the plants we are most often asked for advice about, so I've put together some advice sheets that will hopefully make growing them even easier. The subjects covered are:

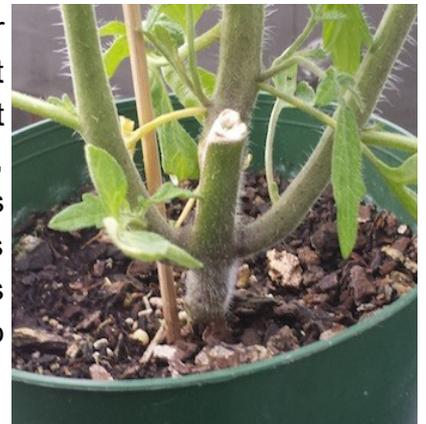
- Caring for the plants immediately after purchase
- Growing on & Repotting
- Hardening off and when to plant outside
- Planting depth
- Planting tomatoes in grow-bags, containers, hanging baskets
- Planting directly into the ground & Greenhouse growing
- To pinch out or not to pinch out...
- How tall should I let the plants grow?
- Supporting tomato plants
- Watering and feeding tomatoes
- Blight and other common tomato problems
- More tomatoes than you can eat?
- Unripe tomatoes?
- Saving seeds

Yvonne's Guide to Growing Tomatoes, part 1

Caring for the plants immediately after purchase

We endeavor to bring the strongest plants available to each sale, as the journey and repeated handling can be a challenge, not to mention the occasionally inclement weather on the day of sale. If the top of your tomato plant gets knocked off, or the stem snaps on the journey home, this is not a problem. So long as there is a leaf joint visible on the main stem, the plant will re-grow from that point (see **pinching out** for more information). Once home, keep the plant somewhere sheltered (preferably a greenhouse), warm and lit with natural daylight. Occasionally plants may have been 'nipped' by a cold wind and have wilted, this isn't terminal, just keep the plant warm and it will perk up. If the edges of the leaves become fragile and papery, they will brown off, but this is purely cosmetic and new leaves will grow as normal.

Don't be tempted to over-water the plants at this stage as they could rot off at the base. The best testing device I've come across is your finger. Stick it in the compost (gently, of course) and see how it feels. If it's very wet the compost will stick to your finger, so don't water it yet; if it feels dry and dusty, it definitely does need watering, and if it's just damp, that's about right. You will get the feel for it, it's not an exact science, and if in doubt, err slightly on the drier side as your tomatoes will recover better from being under-watered at this stage than they will from being over-watered. You'll also get used to how heavy a pot feels when it is well watered or too dry.



Growing on

Tomatoes generally need to be grown in a greenhouse (or similarly light and protected environment) during spring. Our own greenhouses are insulated with bubble-wrap and have electric heaters that only come on when there is a danger of frost. The temperature does occasionally drop as low as 1 or 2 celsius, but generally we try to keep it above 5. Light is very important, especially to young plants. Not enough, and the plant will grow tall and spindly, making it prone to snapping under it's own weight, and also growing 'lopsided' as it reaches towards the light. This is called phototropism, and is preventable by ensuring good light levels. If kept on a windowsill, keep turning the plant regularly to make sure all parts are evenly exposed to light. If it does get too 'leggy', just pinch the main stem off at the desired height and allow the plant to re-grow from a lower point.

Another useful tip I picked up years ago was that once the seedlings have at least one set of true leaves is to gently brush your hand over the top of the seedlings. This gentle disturbance has the effect of stimulating the plant to grow a stronger main stem, as you are replicating the same action as the wind ruffling the leaves of a plant outside. I do this quite regularly, right up to the point that the plants are brought along for sale, as it helps them cope better with windy conditions and makes them less prone to damage when being hardened off (see part 3).

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Repotting

When to re-pot a tomato plant (or in the case of a trailing plant, planting it in a hanging basket) is based on how the roots are developing. If the plant is to be put into a hanging basket, it will be able to be planted directly into it at this point (see **Hanging Baskets** for more information). The best way to judge it's readiness is to hold the pot with your palm covering the soil surface and the stem sticking out between your middle fingers. Tip it upside down carefully and look to see if the roots are coming out the holes in the bottom. If you can't see roots sticking out, the plant is not ready yet. If they are visible, gently tap or squeeze the pot until you feel the compost loosen from the pot and carefully slide the pot off the top.



If the compost falls away from the roots (top left) then carefully slide the pot back onto it and leave it for a few more days and check again. If the plant has formed a good root-ball (see right) it's ready to be repotted. If the roots are literally bursting out of the pot (bottom left), don't panic, it's not too late, but the plant will just take a little longer to recover from the stress of having been a bit root-bound.



Pot size is important when repotting. I generally stick to the prin-

ciple of never using a pot more than twice the diameter of the pot it is currently in, otherwise the plant seems to get a bit 'lost' in the big pot and takes longer to get going again. Our tomato plants are sold in 9cm pots (3.5"), and I will most frequently re-pot mine into pots that are 2ltr / 17cm (7") across. If you don't have this size, a slightly smaller one will be fine, but you may have to re-pot it again before you can plant it out into it's final position. I always re-pot tomatoes deeper than the soil level that they are currently in. I do this at all stages as it helps the plant grow stronger (more about that in **Planting Depth**) so if the depth of the pot you are intending on using allows it, re-pot the tomato a little bit deeper than it was previously.

Once a plant has got the roots showing through the bottom of the 2ltr pot then it is ready for planting into its final position. It is at this stage that you need to 'harden off' the plant to get it used to being outdoors before you plant it into the ground. If you're planning on keeping it in a pot permanently, then it's not quite so important as the final pot can still be moved if needed. See **Hardening off** for more information.

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Hardening off and when to plant outside

This is one of the subjects we are asked about most frequently, and there is no definitive answer for when you should do it. The factors that influence this are the weather, your general location (we're based at sea-level and very close to the coast where it is generally milder), and your specific micro-climate (such as an exposed allotment site, up a hill or in a north facing garden etc).

Tomatoes are not frost-proof, and so if you are considering hardening them off (after they have been growing on inside a greenhouse) then pay close attention to your local weather forecasts. We all know that forecasts aren't 100% foolproof but it will always be safest to delay planting a little later than risk losing the plants that you have carefully nurtured for some time.

Generally speaking, it will take around a week to harden off tomato plants before they can go into the ground outside. The way to do it is to start on a bright and mild day and leave them outside in a sunny position during the day and bring them in again for the evening. Once they have got used to this for a few days, then (subject to the weather forecast) try to leave them outside overnight in a very sheltered position. One thing to be particularly aware of during this period is to make sure that the plant has a cane in the pot for support as it will not have been used to coping with wind in the greenhouse, although this isn't necessary for trailing-type tomatoes.

Planting Depth

One way of helping your tomato plant grow as strong a main stem as possible is to plant it deep. The reason you can do this is because tomatoes grow 'adventitious roots', which basically means extra roots will appear part-way up the main stem. Take a look at the bottom of the plants main stem once it has got to the thickness of a pencil and you will probably see bumps appearing, like on the right-hand picture.

As these develop, they will look like little greenish-white strands, and grow downwards towards the soil, like in the left-hand picture. Planting the tomato deeper than the soil level it is already growing at will encourage these roots to grow fully. Not only will this make the plant more stable, but also create a bigger root-system, enabling the plant to feed more, hence a bigger crop. I often plant my tomatoes 15cm / 6 inches deep when planting in their final position, as shown on the right.



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Planting tomatoes in grow-bags

Grow-bags are a popular means of growing tomatoes, especially in greenhouses, however, they do have their limitations. The biggest challenge is the fact that they contain a relatively small volume of soil, which ultimately restricts the amount of nutrients available for the plants to feed on (see **feeding tomatoes** for more information). This low volume also means that they do dry out very quickly, and so if you are using grow-bags, I really would suggest putting a big watering tray underneath the bag to slow down the problem.



One way of addressing the problem of low soil volume is to use 'planting rings', as shown on the left. These allow you to back-fill the inner part with more soil which allows the plant to feed more and also grow more roots to help stabilize it. The downside to these purpose-built rings is that they are quite expensive, so if you're after a cheaper option, most supermarkets get rid of the empty florist buckets that their cut flowers arrive in (Morrisons sell them at 99p for 8), and if you cut the bottom off these buckets they can be easily pushed into the top of the grow-bag and do the same job but for a fraction of the cost.

There are also clever racks designed to hold grow-bags on their side, which has the effect of



providing a deeper planting area, and helps the grow-bag maintain its shape instead of flopping apart and allowing the soil to be washed away like in the right-hand picture.



A further limitation with grow-bags is that without the aid of some device to hold the cane in place, it is very hard to provide adequate support for tomato plants, and they run the risk of falling over or snapping off.

There are numerous plant support systems specially designed for grow-bags, it's just a case of finding one that suits you (and your budget). For more information on tomato supports, see the section **plant supports**.



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Planting in containers

Tomatoes are well-suited to growing in containers. For a standard tall-growing tomato, I would always recommend using a pot that is a minimum of 7.5ltr capacity (around 23cm/9" diameter), but my own preference is for something a bit bigger at 10ltr (around 27cm/10" diameter). If it's dwarf variety (under 60cm / 2') tall then you could use a slightly smaller pot, but bear in mind the smaller the pot the more likely it is to become top-heavy and blow over.

As already mentioned in the **planting depth** section, if the depth of the container allows it, it is a good idea to sink the plant in deeper when replanting it, particularly from a stability perspective in this instance.

There are numerous ways of supporting tomato plants, discussed in further detail in the **plant supports** section, but one that is purpose-built for pots is shown on the right. Depending on the size of the container used, the base of the support can either be buried inside the pot, or else the plant pot can be stood over the base and the can slid into the container once in position. If you are able to put the support inside the pot it is much more stable, and also easier to move the pot without risking damage to the plant.



Plants grown in containers are totally reliant on the gardener to provide water and nutrients as the roots don't have access to the soil. This is why a slightly larger pot size is advisable as it is then less likely to dry out (use a large saucer or watering tray underneath if possible). When I grow tomatoes in pots I generally use multi-purpose compost (MPC) as part of the soil mix, as MPC alone usually only has sufficient nutrients to feed the plant before it becomes exhausted. Personally, my own preference is to mix MPC with well-rotted horse manure and compost from my own compost heap. I try to aim for around 1/3 of each ingredient but it depends on what I have available at the time. Well-rotted farm-yard manure can be bought in most garden centres and despite many peoples fears it feels and smells no different to ordinary MPC. If you have space, I'd really advise setting up your own manure heap and filling it with horse manure that is freely available at many stable gates you find along the roadside. Horse manure rots down very quickly and dependant on the season, it can be ready in as little as 3 months. It really is one of the best things you can add to any soil / compost used for tomato-growing. If you don't have access to manure in the pots, then you can always add a handful of 'growmore' (right), or 'pelleted chicken manure' (left), both available in tubs at any garden centre, and mix these in with the MPC when you plant the tomatoes.



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Hanging baskets

Growing tomatoes in hanging baskets is very easy and takes up very little space. The most common question we get asked is 'how many plants do I need for a basket?', and the answer is that it depends upon the size of the basket.

- Up to 10 inches / 25cm - 1 plant
- 12 inches / 30cm - 2 plants
- 14 inches or larger / 35cm - 3 plants

I grow quite a few baskets for my own use at home and I favour the 16 inch / 40cm baskets (I still only put 3 plants in them though), and this is because the greater volume of compost provides more nutrients for the plants. It goes without saying though, the bigger the basket, the heavier it will be, so make sure you can lift it up safely. There are 'hi lo' pulley type systems available that allow you to raise and lower the baskets with little effort, making watering easier if you're not the tallest person around...

Make sure that the brackets you use are big enough to prevent the basket from bashing against the wall if it's windy, and also to make sure the plants have enough room to grow properly and still get good light and ventilation all round. The general rule for this would be that if you are using a 14 inch / 35 cm basket, get a bracket that is at least the same length as the pot is wide. There are plenty of retailers that sell large brackets, and I actually use them up to 60 cm long as this allows excellent clearance. There are helpful things like swivel hooks (pictured left) that can be used to rotate the baskets. The reason for doing this is that it prevents one side of the basket from growing too bushy while the other side has less light, and this is particularly useful if the basket is in a semi-protected place like the one I have hanging up under my front porch.



The biggest problem you're likely to encounter with growing tomatoes in



baskets is keeping them sufficiently well watered. There are several things you can do to help. Firstly, use water retaining gel crystals (see left), and mix them into the compost when you're planting the basket up. Be aware that these soak up a massive volume of water and don't fill the basket up to the top or else when you water it for the first time the compost will literally be climbing over the edge of the basket because it's too full. Another method I use to stop the baskets drying out is to line the inside with a plastic dustbin liner or empty compost bag and then trim it back once filled up to hide the not-so-pretty edges. The one thing to be wary of with this is that you don't over-water it as there are no drainage holes, but you will quickly get used to how heavy the basket feels when deciding if it is necessary to water it.

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Planting directly into the ground

All the tomato varieties we offer can be grown indoors or outdoors. The advantages to growing them outside are that garden soil will generally contain more nutrients than you find in multi-purpose compost, and plants grown outside will usually be less reliant upon you for watering as their root systems can grow deep to reach the water already in the soil. I grow the vast majority of my tomatoes outdoors and I don't find that this reduces the crop, although it may mean that if you plant two of the same variety at the same time, one indoors and one outdoors, the indoor one is likely to produce the first ripe tomatoes a little bit ahead of the outdoor ones. This shouldn't be a problem as it means that you will usually have fresh tomatoes growing over a slightly longer period than if you just grow them in the greenhouse.

Before you plant your tomatoes outside, you will need to have hardened them off to make sure they aren't shocked by the sudden change in their circumstances. This is mentioned in the **hardening off** section. I always plant my tomatoes up to 6 inches / 15 cm deeper when planting directly into the garden soil as this allows for more root development, and there is more detail on this in the **planting depth** section. At the time of planting it can be helpful to mix in a shovelful of well rotted manure / garden compost or a handful of chicken manure pellets into the soil at the bottom of the planting hole as this will provide a kick-start for the plants in their new home. Providing good support for the plants is especially important if you're growing them outdoors as they will have to contend with the wind. There are a multitude of options available and these are looked at in detail in the **plant supports** section.

Greenhouse growing

Within a greenhouse you have a choice of growing in containers, grow-bags or directly in the soil. The sections for **grow-bags** and **containers** provide specific information relating to those methods, however if you're planting directly into the soil in a greenhouse border, you do have certain considerations to bear in mind. The soil is protected from the outside environment and can often get dried out more quickly, and also have nutrients and minerals removed from it if you repeatedly grow the same crop in it year after year. The way to reduce this problem is to remove the top layer of soil each year and refill with fresh topsoil, or to keep adding garden compost or well-rotted manure to keep the soil quality high.

Growing under glass can also mean that you are more likely to suffer from greenfly or whitefly infestations. There are several ways of dealing with this, and my preferred method is 'companion planting'. I plant a mixture of basil plants, French marigolds and calendula in the greenhouse borders between the tomato plants as the problem bugs seem to hate the smell of them, but they also attract the beneficial insects like bees. And if you grow basil next to your tomatoes, it's perfect for a tomato salad!

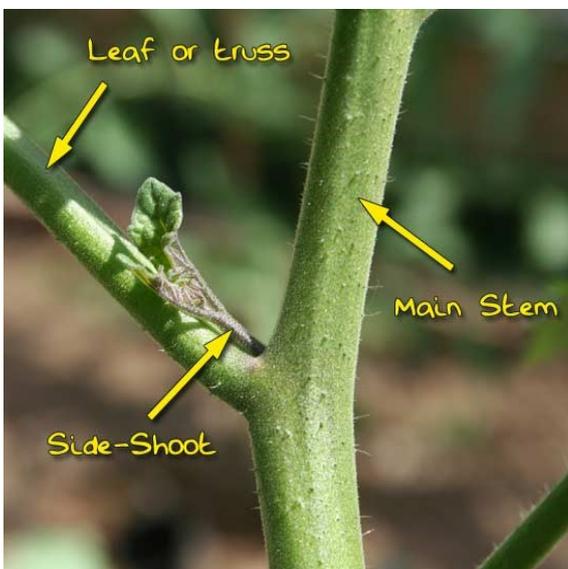


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To pinch out or not to pinch out...

Again, this is another topic we are asked about every week, and the answer depends upon the type of tomato you want to grow. All our tomato plants have their height marked on the label, and this should be the indicator for whether or not they need to be pinched out:

- Hanging basket / dwarf - no need to pinch out
- Bush / medium height - height will be up to 4ft tall, generally no need to pinch out but may need to if the plant gets too vigorous and is likely to collapse under it's own weight, so provide some support if you don't want to have to pinch out side shoots
- Tall - pinching out of side shoots is strongly advised



Side shoots are the small growths that appear at the joint between the main stem of the plant and the leaf or fruit truss that grows out from the main stem.

It is usually fairly easy to spot the side shoots on plants, but if you're not quite sure, have a look at the plants we have with us for sale as they usually still have side shoots growing, partly as the side shoots are still quite small, but also so that we can show customers who are new to tomato-growing what they are looking for and how to do it themselves (and try it too if they want to have a go). It really isn't the dark art some people imagine it to be!

Side shoots can be removed at any size, but I have found that they are easiest to remove when they are between 1 and 2 inches (2.5 - 5cm) in length. That way they're not too fiddly to get hold of but aren't too big that they physically distort the plant or drain too much energy from what you really want the plant to be doing. Simply grasp the side shoot between your thumb and index finger (as on the right), and snap it off sharply to one side.



If the side shoot has grown quite large then it can be an idea to hold the main stem with your other hand to make sure you don't snap off more than you intended to.

The side shoots can actually be used to propagate new tomato plants for free. Wait until the side shoot is around 3 inches / 7.5cm before you remove it, and then put it in a jar of water and within a week it will start to sprout new roots and once it looks like the ones on the left it can be re-potted and grown on like any other tomato plant.

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How tall should I let the plants grow?

This will depend on how much room you can allow them to grow and how much support you can give them. If you are limited by the height of your greenhouse then you simply snap the top of the plant off when it reaches the maximum height you want it to grow to, but be aware that you will have to keep a close eye on any side shoots it may produce as its natural urge will be to keep growing and you will find that it tries to re-grow from the highest leaf joint (a useful thing if you have accidentally knocked the top off the plant at any stage).

Some people will recommend that you should pinch the top off a tomato plant once it has developed 4-6 fruit trusses, but this is not something that I practice myself. I will allow my own tomatoes to keep growing to the top of the cane (I use 8ft / 2.4m canes) but be aware that the taller the plant grows the stronger the support you will need to use as it becomes very top-heavy. I've had pot-grown cherry tomato plants (Goldkrone) with up to 15 fruit trusses on them, but have tied the top of the cane against a drain-pipe for security. If you do want to allow the plants to grow a very heavy crop, just make sure that you keep up with the watering and feeding (see **tomato food** for more information) as a big crop will place high demands on the plant.

Supporting tomato plants

There are many ways of providing support for tall growing tomato plants. The most widely used method is bamboo canes, and tying the plants in with either string or metal / plastic plant rings. I use this method frequently, and my advice is to make sure that the rings you use are big enough and strong enough as a plant can get blown over on a windy day if the rings are weak. Also, spacing is important, even more so when growing larger tomatoes because I've had them collapse downwards in a 'concertina' heap because the gaps were too far apart to keep the stem tightly against the supporting cane.

The method I use in the greenhouse (a heavy duty greenhouse) is to attach support rings (right) to the roof bars and the trail paracord, a strong rot-proof cord, from these rings, and bury the bottom of the cord under the plant when it's being planted, and as the plant grows, I twist the stem around the cord (right), creating a strong support.



For the 'micro' tomatoes like Sweet Pea, Spoon, Gold Rush Currant, I create a cage from canes and twine (right) and allow the plants to grow within their 'cage' as they produce a profusion of tiny tomatoes.

These tall-growing varieties won't need to be pinched out .

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Watering and feeding tomatoes

When I re-pot tomatoes at the seedling stage into the 9cm pots they are sold in, they are fed a single time with an all purpose soluble plant food. This gives the plants a boost to help them past the difficult re-potting stage. I tend to use this several times in the early season, especially when re-potting my own tomatoes. As with any proprietary plant food, it is best to follow the directions on the label at the start, until you are happy and confident to develop a feeding regime that works well for you and your plants.

Once the tomato plant has set a truss of fruit, it is best to switch to a tomato food, as this contains a balance of nutrients that promotes fruit production, as opposed to a general purpose one that encourages leaf and stem formation. I use a powdered tomato food that I mix with water when needed, as this has provided excellent results for me for many years. Both these food types can be purchased from us at any of our events, If you use another brand of plant food, always follow the instructions on the pack when it comes to strength and frequency. Incidentally, tomato food also works well for chilli / pepper plants and courgettes too.

As previously mentioned in the specific sections on **growbags**, **containers** and **planting directly in the ground**, it is often a good idea to add longer-acting plant food sources (such as horse manure, grow-more and chicken manure pellets) directly into the soil or compost at the time of planting. If this wasn't an option, use the manure as a mulch spread around the bottom of the plant, or lightly sprinkle the pellet under the lower leaves (but be aware that the pellets seem to be a particularly tempting 'treat' for some dogs).

Comfrey also makes a fantastic plant food: either chop up the leaves and use as a mulch, or allow the leaves to rot down in water and use the tea-coloured liquid as a weekly plant food. I keep a water-butt at the end of the garden purely for comfrey, and as the water level is topped up by rain the potency of the solution is diluted, but then I just add more comfrey leaves. It's a whiffy water-butt but the plant food is fantastic.



When watering tomatoes, try to avoid getting the leaves wet and aim to just water the soil. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, keeping the leaves dry will reduce the chances of getting a fungal infection, especially at the in a humid greenhouse environment early in season when plants can often be crammed together rather closely. Secondly, water droplets on leaves act like tiny magnifying glasses when the sun shines on them and can cause burns on the leaves. As the summer progresses, the third factor comes into play: Blight (covered in more detail a bit later on), and keeping the leaves as dry as possible will reduce the chances of your plants becoming infected. Once the plant is in its final position and growing well, it is a good idea to gradually remove some of the lower leaves (as shown on the left) to leave a bit of clear stem at the bottom. This improves air circulation (and thus reduces fungal / blight problems) and means that you can check easily whether the soil is wet enough or not. I personally prefer to keep the bottom 6 - 12 inches /15 - 30cm of stem clear of leaves.



Yvonne's Guide to Growing Tomatoes, part 11

Blight (part 1)

Blight affects tomatoes and potatoes as they are part of the same plant family. It can devastate a crop at an alarming rate, and it was blight that caused the potato crops in Ireland to fail repeatedly from 1845 to 1852, the period known as the Irish Potato Famine.

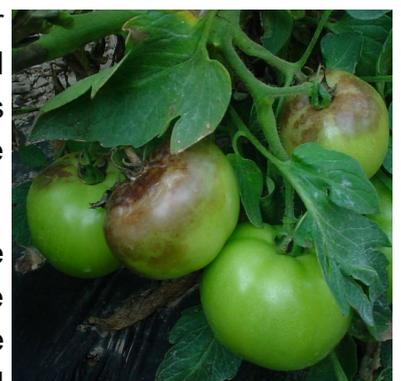
Blight is a fungal infection (*phytophthora infestans*) that is prevalent after a period of warm, wet weather, and the spores that infect the tomatoes are spread on the wind and in water. There is little we can do about the wind, but keeping the leaves as dry as possible reduces the chances for the spores to settle on the leaves and for the infection to take hold. Growing tomatoes in a greenhouse isn't a guaranteed way of avoiding blight as the spores will come through open vents, windows or doors, but keeping the greenhouse airtight would only lead to other fungal infections due to high humidity. A greenhouse can mean that the infection is delayed, but once it gets a hold, it spreads even faster in an enclosed environment.



The first sign of blight is a small patch on the leaves (shown top left). At first the leaves will appear damp, but as it spreads along the leaf (top right) it will become drier and almost papery to touch. The infection will continue to spread through the stems (middle left) until it reaches the tomatoes themselves (middle right), before infecting the entire plant (bottom left and right). At the earliest signs of blight, remove the infected part of the plant and either burn it or bin it (never in the compost heap), and keep your garden tools and your hands scrupulously clean as the spores can be transferred so easily.



It is a very hard disease to combat because the range of chemical treatments available to the home grower is becoming ever more restricted. Bordeaux Mixture is a traditional copper-based remedy that can help slow down the spread of the disease, but do follow the instructions on the packet.



Visit www.blightwatch.co.uk for further information, and to get alerts for when blight is likely in your postcode area.



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Blight (part 2) and other common tomato problems

Blight is a significant problem when growing tomatoes, but don't let it dissuade you from growing them. The severity of the problem is very much dependant upon our weather, and unfortunately we cannot control that. Over recent years there has been a lot of research into developing 'blight resistant' tomatoes. These are hybrid tomatoes, easily spotted by the F1 in their name. The important thing to bear in mind is that they resist the blight but are not immune to it, and will usually succumb at some point. The other consideration with these F1 varieties is their cost. They are (in my opinion) prohibitively expensive to grow as the seeds will often be around £1 each, even if 100% germination were achieved (a rarity).

As you may be aware, our focus with tomatoes is on the heirloom or heritage varieties, those that have stood the test of time and previous generations of gardeners have seen fit to preserve their unique characteristics. Within our range there are varieties that have been recognized as having notable resistance to blight and other diseases, and they include Black Cherry, Chico III, Koralik (blight resistant), Lizzano (blight resistant), Matts Wild Cherry and Tropic. Through my own observations of having grown it for around 7 years now, I would also add Goldkrone to that list as it has always been one of the last varieties to fall to blight.

Blossom end rot

This unpleasant-sounding condition is not actually a disease. It is in fact the result of a calcium deficiency, and is often the result of insufficient or erratic watering. It's more prevalent on the fruit at the earlier end of the season, and thus as the season progresses you should become more adept at judging the watering needs of your tomato plants.



Yellow leaves

Tomatoes need a lot of magnesium, and sometimes there won't be enough of it in the soil or compost they are growing in. An easy remedy for this is to apply magnesium sulfate in the form of Epsom Salts. Just dilute 1 or 2 tablespoons in a gallon of water, and water the plant around the base. You will soon see the leaves return to their normal dark green, and you will also have a higher yield of even sweeter tomatoes.



Catfacing

This is the name given to the deformity that afflicts some tomatoes. It isn't a disease, it's simply the result of poor pollination, the most common cause of which is low temperatures. These not-so-beautiful tomatoes are still perfectly safe to eat and taste just the same so don't panic.



Yvonne's Guide to Growing Tomatoes, part 13

More tomatoes than you can eat?

What a lovely problem this is to have! There are only so many tomatoes you can eat (apparently), and once you've passed them over the garden fence or to your allotment neighbours you have to get a bit more creative. I create a lot of jars or ketchup, salsa and Bolognese-type sauces, and while there are a lot of different recipes out there, I can't speak highly enough of the wealth of information found in the recipe section of the Readers Digest book shown on the right. I've used these recipes as the basis for my own experiments and it gives good advice for how to preserve your concoctions in glass jars almost indefinitely so that you never have to buy jars in the supermarket again.



Another fantastic source of ideas for using up a glut of tomatoes (or any other vegetable or fruit) is the website www.allotment-garden.org. This site has a recipes section that does things just a little bit differently: as well as a standard list of recipes, it will allow you to list all the recipes by ingredients, so for example you can get a list of all the recipes that contain tomatoes, or courgettes, or whatever else you have too much of.

Unripe tomatoes?

If you are left with a few unripe tomatoes at the end of the season you can ripen them off using nature's own ripening gas 'ethylene'. All you need to do is put the green tomatoes in a box or bag with a ripe banana and the banana will give off ethylene and speed up the ripening process for the tomatoes.

If you are unlucky enough to have a few too many green tomatoes (some years ago I had a lot due to a very bad problem with blight) then there are a multitude of recipes for green tomatoes, and my favourite is Green Tomato Chutney, a wonderful tangy accompaniment to many meals.

Saving seeds

The majority of the tomatoes we grow are heirloom / heritage varieties (open-pollinated varieties), with only a very small number of F1 or hybrid varieties. It will usually state on the plant label if a variety is an F1 variety. Open pollinated tomatoes are self-fertile and generally don't cross-pollinate with other varieties, and this means that the tomatoes you grow from saved seeds will grow true to the original.

For detailed advice on how to save your own tomato seeds, visit the 'Real Seeds' website at <http://www.realseeds.co.uk/seedsavinginfo.html> as this is the advice I followed many years ago when I first got interested in tomatoes. If you're even more keen they'll show you how to breed your own tomato variety as well!