



TIPS FOR GROWING TOMATOES

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They say gardening is cheaper than therapy, and you get tomatoes! But if you've been having trouble producing tomatoes, allow me to be your horticulture therapist and offer some tips for tomato gardening success:

- **Pick the best varieties for Florida.** Select varieties that are resistant to known pests and diseases (including fusarium wilt and nematodes).
- **Determinate or Indeterminate?** Determinate “bush” or “patio” tomatoes grow to a determinate size, don’t require pruning, and have fruit that ripen all at once over a period of 1-3 weeks, making them perfect for growing in containers and canning. Indeterminate “vine” tomatoes continue to grow and produce fruit throughout the season and require staking and pruning to keep a tidy plant.
- **Timing is everything.** Florida’s warm weather means we can plant early. Start seeds in containers and transplant to the garden after the danger of frost—typically late March or early April here in north Florida. But don’t plant too late! Some varieties need time to grow and produce fruit before temperatures soar. When night temps begin to average 80 degrees, cherry and grape types will continue to flourish but large-fruited varieties will not set fruit.
- **Provide ideal growing conditions.** Tomatoes need at least 4 to 6 hours of sun per day and slightly acidic soil (pH 6.2-6.5) amended with organic compost. Mulching is also beneficial.
- **Plant deep & remove flowers.** Encourage deeper rooting by removing the lower leaves and burying stems up to the plant’s second true set of leaves. Roots will form along the buried stem. Remove flowers present at planting time to promote leafy growth instead of fruit at this early stage.



- **Provide support.** Wire cages, stakes and trellis systems are all popular supports for indeterminate varieties. Install support structures before or soon after planting so as not to disturb the plant's roots. Use tomato clips or ties as needed to attach plants to their support as they grow. Alternatively, stakes can be placed between each plant in the row and twine can periodically be weaved through the row of stakes to support plants as they get taller.
- **Avoid high nitrogen fertilizers.** Too much nitrogen encourages foliage at the expense of fruit. Consider using a slow-release product to provide a low, continuous supply.
- **Water efficiently.** Apply no more than 1-2 inches of water per week. Drip irrigation is preferred because it delivers a precise amount of water and keeps water off the leaves which is important for disease prevention.
- **Prune to keep plants tidy, manipulate fruit size, speed ripening and reduce diseases.** Some gardeners prefer to remove suckers that grow from leaf axils. With fewer leaves, pruned plants are less dense, have improved airflow and less disease. Removing lower leaves that touch the ground also prevents disease. While removing the suckers ultimately means removing stems that would later produce fruit, a tidier plant allows for closer plant spacing down the row so that total yield is not reduced. For fall tomato crops, topping plants will speed ripening if cold temperatures threaten.



Additional Resources

Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide
<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh021>

Tomatoes in the Florida Garden
<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh028>

Disorders of Tomato Fruit
<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hs200>

Tomato Diseases
<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pp121>