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Opening Extract from...

The RHS Allotment Handbook

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Tomatoes

Cherry tomatoes will produce a bumper crop of small, bite-sized fruit over several weeks.

There are numerous tomato varieties – just over 500 are listed – including all sorts of colours and types. They range from the small-fruited cherry types through plum tomatoes to the monster beefsteaks; from the standard red to yellow, orange, green, purple, and striped; from the tall cordon varieties to bush and even hanging-basket types. In fact, the choice can be overwhelming when deciding which ones to grow each year. The large seed companies stock a wide range of varieties, but because tomato growing is so popular, there are now several smaller companies offering an even wider range of older or heritage or heirloom varieties too.

On the allotment, unless you have a greenhouse or polytunnel, you'll be restricted to growing outdoor varieties. But if you do have the warmth these structures provide, then your choice will be even wider. Beefsteak tomatoes, for instance, are only reliable if grown indoors. You'll also benefit from earlier, longer, and bigger harvests.

Standard tall varieties (sometimes referred to as indeterminate) are grown as cordons and need to have their sideshoots removed and be tied to a support. The shorter bush varieties (also called determinate) are allowed to get on with it and need little or no support.

F1 varieties produce the most reliable crops, and many have been bred to be resistant to a range of diseases. An increasing range of grafted tomatoes, with one variety grafted on to another rootstock, is also available. These have been shown to be even more reliable, especially in an indifferent summer, and resistant to a number of diseases.

Blight

A range of pests and diseases can attack tomatoes, but there is one that all tomato growers fear: blight. This turns first the leaves, then the stems and fruit brown, and renders the fruit mushy and inedible. Ultimately, the plants die. Early control is essential: remove affected parts and spray with a copper or mancozeb fungicide. Blight needs specific conditions of warmth and humidity in summer to strike: these can be anticipated and blight alerts are given on farming radio programmes and the internet.

Sowing

Sow at 18°C (64°F) in either seed trays or small pots. Transplant individually

Pot up young plants into small pots once two true leaves have fully formed.

Remove the sideshoots from cordon-grown tomato plants as soon as they're large enough to handle.

into 7–9cm (3–3½in) pots when two true leaves have formed. Grow on the young plants at a minimum of 10°C (50°F).

For greenhouse cultivation, this means you can sow from mid- to late winter to grow on in a heated greenhouse, or from late winter to early spring for an unheated greenhouse.

For outdoor cultivation, sow in early to mid-spring, or eight weeks before the last frosts are expected locally. Harden plants off for 10–14 days before planting outside, after the last heavy frost is thought to have passed.

Growing

Choose your warmest, sunniest position for outdoor tomatoes. Tomatoes are not frost hardy, so don't plant outside until all fear of frosts has passed. Even if they survive a frost, you could be better off starting again with new plants.

Plant in growing bags or 23cm (9in) pots, or plant 45–60cm (18–24in) apart when the flowers of the first truss are beginning to open.

Although growing bags are a favourite choice for tomatoes, the plants in them need a lot more care than those growing in pots or in the ground. There is so little compost in the bags that it soon dries out and the plants suffer as a result. Regular watering, even two or three times a day, is essential to keep the compost moist.

Outside, ensure the soil has been enriched with plenty of well-rotted organic matter and add a general fertiliser just before planting out.

Upright cordon varieties will need supporting. The commonest method is to tie the main stem to a sturdy vertical 1.8m (6ft) bamboo cane with 30cm (1ft) inserted into the ground. Remove the sideshoots from leaf axils regularly once they are about 2.5cm (1in) long.

Water all tomatoes regularly to keep the soil or compost evenly moist. Feed every 10–14 days with a balanced liquid fertiliser, changing to a high-potash feed and more frequent application once the first fruits start to set. Remove the growing point of the main stem at two leaves above the top truss once outdoor cordon-grown plants have set four trusses. Do the same to indoor tomatoes when they have seven trusses or once they reach the top of the greenhouse or polytunnel. This will stop further fruiting and allow those that have set to ripen.

Always aim to keep plants evenly moist to avoid fruits cracking. Irregular watering together with a lack of calcium in the soil also leads to blossom end rot, which causes the bottom of the fruit to turn black and become sunken.

Harvesting

The approximate time between sowing and harvesting is 16–20 weeks. Start picking as soon as the fruits are ripe and fully coloured. Don't leave mature fruits on the plant to soften and split. At the end of the season lift plants with unripe fruit and lay them on straw under cloches or hang them in a cool shed to ripen. Alternatively, pick the green fruits and store them with a ripe apple or banana.

Tomatoes come in a wide range of shapes, sizes and colours. Try to grow a good selection.

Yield: Up to 4.5kg (10lb) per plant.

Beefsteak tomatoes produce irregularly shaped fruit, but they have a fantastic flavour.

AT A GLANCE

Tomatoes are among our most popular vegetables, and that's not surprising since their taste fresh from the vine is unbeatable. With good conditions and a bit of care you can be picking tomatoes for several weeks into autumn. Even green, unripened tomatoes at the end of the year are worth picking for green tomato chutney or the American classic, fried green tomatoes.

ALLOTMENT ADVICE: what I wish I'd known

Flavour is an important factor when choosing varieties, and most gardeners have favourites. But bear in mind that how you grow also has a major influence on flavour. Keep the soil or compost evenly moist throughout the growing period and feed regularly with a high-potash fertiliser to enhance the flavour. Good warmth and sunshine are also needed.

TRIED AND TESTED RHS VARIETIES

Standard: 'Ailsa Craig', 'Alicante' (AGM), 'Ferline', 'Moneymaker', 'Outdoor Girl' (AGM), 'Shirley' (AGM)
Beefsteak: 'Beefsteak' (AGM), 'Costoluto Fiorentino' (AGM), 'Marmande' (AGM)
Cherry: 'Gardener's Delight' (AGM), 'Golden Sweet' (AGM), 'Sakura' (AGM), 'Sun Baby' (AGM), 'Suncherry Premium' (AGM), 'Sungold' (AGM), 'Sunset' (AGM)
Plum: 'Floridity' (AGM), 'Ildi' (AGM), 'Olivade' F1 (AGM), 'Roma', 'Summer Sweet' (AGM), 'Sweet Olive' (AGM)
Bush: 'Red Alert', 'Tornado' (AGM), 'Totem'
Hanging basket: 'Tumbler', 'Tumbling Tom Red', 'Tumbling Tom Yellow'