

# Growing Tomatoes in Containers



**H**ave a hankering to grow your own tomatoes, but don't have the space? Consider container gardening. Follow these five basic steps to grow your own delicious tomatoes.

## Type of container

Find at least a five-gallon container for the significant roots that will eventually develop. Find containers with drain holes or drill your own drain holes if needed. Wash any used containers with a light bleach solution like you would use to clean your clay pots. Hint: used tree containers found at most garden center recycling bins can be used

## Type of tomato plant

Tomatoes plants exist in great variety but one basic difference is: determinate vs indeterminate. Determinate plants will only grow to a certain size like 2-4 ft tall/wide and for specific, usually shorter time periods. But they will produce only once or for a shorter period too. A simple tomato cage may be sufficient to hold the plant. Cherry or "patio" tomatoes are likely candidates.

An indeterminate plant will grow and produce all the way to frost in the fall. But this plant will require managing a limited number of stems and much more support as they continue to get longer. Many traditional tomatoes such as red slicing varieties are likely to be of this type. Read the seed package or plant tag. Resistance to various diseases are also indicated on these tags. Hint: five tomato varieties suitable for container gardening include Patio Princess, Window Box Roma, Bushsteak, Super Bush Hybrid, and Tumbler.

## Soil

Potting soils are necessary for container growing. Garden soil will dry and harden. Potting soil will contain organic material to help moisture retention and inorganic material such as perlite to help drainage and keep the soil loose. While large containers will require larger amounts of potting soil, if you do container gardening year after year, then you may be able to reuse up to half of the used soil with some rejuvenation. Hint: there is no need to put rocks in the bottom for drainage, but check occasionally to ensure your drainage holes are still working. Also, consider placing a mesh screen on the inside bottom of your container to keep soil from being lost through the drain holes.

## Watering

Watering is extremely important for your growing plant. Watering frequency will increase to daily or even twice daily during hot, dry weather and when the plant is producing fruit. Hint: tomatoes want a moist environment, so thoroughly soak the soil up front and let it dry until the top inch or more is dry, then soak again until water comes out the bottom.

## Fertilizer

Fertilizing is also important in this fast growing and heavily producing plant. Many commercial potting soils will contain a timed release fertilizer initially, but this is not likely to last an entire season. So a balanced Ni-

trogen-Phosphorus-Potassium (like 5-5-5 NPK) will be needed. No heavy concentration of one primary element is wanted because each supports separate aspects like growth of top leaves, roots, or fruiting and you want all three. Compost will help provide some micro nutrients and lime or crushed eggshells provide calcium. These are the elements that would be used to rejuvenate old soil if you are using some in the bottom half of your container. After the initial period, you should work new timed release fertilizer into the top couple of inches of soil so watering will bring it down to the roots. Hint: Use liquid kelp or fish emulsion if practicing organic farming.

## Summary

So choose your container, soil, and plant. Then water, fertilize and support your plant as needed. Transplant only one plant per container, and set it deep into the soil so that the bottom leaves are almost touching the soil. Tomatoes will grow more roots from the stem where the soil touches. This will make a stronger plant.

And remember to check your plant in the morning for leaves stripped down to a bare stem. If you observe this, look for and remove that ugly tomato hornworm whose green color looks just like a very fat tomato stem. This is the larvae of a big hawk moth. If you find him early, then the leaves will grow back.

Credit: Special thanks to Rick McCormick, Chesterfield County Master Gardener, for his “sage” advice.

