

Tomatoes

by Jeff_Rugg

Q: I want to grow tomatoes in my garden. I have never made a garden before and when I started looking at the tomatoes in the catalogs there were a lot of words that I have never heard used with a vegetable. Can you make this a little clearer for me?

A: Tomatoes are by far the most popular garden vegetable. They actually are the fruit of the plant, but they are used in cooking as a vegetable. For botanists, having seeds and pulp produced from a single ovary means that tomatoes are actually a berry.

A tomato is called determinate if the plant stops growing when the fruit starts growing. The harvest time is limited because all the fruit develop at the same time and then the plant is done. It can be pulled out and new vegetables planted for a new crop of something else, such as a fall cool season crop. Determinate tomatoes can be useful for canning purposes since all the fruit is ready at the same time. They also tend to not grow too tall, so they may not need supports.

Indeterminate tomatoes continue to produce new shoots and flowers after the first fruit have begun growing. You can have ripe tomatoes, green tomatoes and flowers all on the plant at once. The harvest is extended over a long time. This tomato growth pattern is useful for eating tomatoes that you might want fresh off the vine. They will be ready for many weeks, until a frost gets them or until the hot weather stops them from flowering.

Indeterminate tomatoes usually benefit from staking, a cage or a trellis. These devices hold the tomato vines up off the ground. Any fruit that ripen on the ground run the risk of being rotten before harvest.

Early, mid- and late season are just terms the catalogs use to describe how soon the tomatoes and other vegetables will be ready for harvest. There isn't a specific number of weeks for one term or the other; it is just a general idea that some tomatoes will produce fruit quickly, some not for a long time and others will be in between.

Tomato varieties are sometimes listed with capital letters V, F, A, T or N after the name. These varieties are hybrids that are resistant to the fungal diseases of Verticillium Wilt, Fusarium Wilt, Alternaria fungi, Tobacco Mosaic Virus or to Nematodes. There may be as many as three capital F's after a name because there are three different varieties of Fusarium Wilt and a hybrid may be tolerant of one, two or all three kinds.

Most catalogs or seed packages will list a number of days until maturity, or days until harvest. This is Gardening Time, which tends to run much slower than clock or calendar time.

If the seeds are planted in the garden, then only planting until harvest is considered. Some seeds are planted indoors first and then the sprout is transplanted into the garden. The six to eight weeks of indoor time is not included in the calculation of days until harvest, just the outdoor garden time. Every garden season has different temperatures, rainfall and sunshine versus cloudiness and other weather factors, so the fruit will mature when they are good and ready, not when the catalog says they will.

Warm season vegetables like tomatoes really need warm soil and air. In northern climates, they should be transplanted out into the garden a couple of weeks after the last frost date, which means calculating the indoor planting date back from the outdoor planting date. In southern climates, they are usually planted in the fall or winter, so they can produce fruit before the hot summer weather sets in. Most tomato plants stop blooming when the nighttime temperatures stay in the 70s or higher. There are some newer varieties that are called hot tomatoes for use in southern gardens.

Tomato fruit are often described as being cherries, plums, pears or hearts. There isn't a perfect definition of the shapes of tomatoes, but here are some guidelines: A cherry tomato is small, round and often used in salads. A grape tomato is about the same size, but is more oval in shape. Pear tomatoes are cherry tomato sized and shaped like pears while plum tomatoes are about twice the size of a cherry tomato.

Beefsteak tomatoes are typically wider than tall so they are not ball shaped, but sort of flattened. They also tend to be ribbed with lots of walls. Oxheart tomatoes are triangular or top shaped, being wider at the stem end. Slicing tomatoes tend to be round so the slices fit on a hamburger bun. Paste tomatoes have more pulp and less of the locule gel surrounding the seeds. Locule â€” now there is a word for you Scrabble players. It is the small compartment in a plant ovary where the seeds are produced.

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