

# Keep Tomatoes Coming Longer



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Many gardeners harvest far more tomatoes than they can use during the early part of summer, then few or none from late summer through fall. But it doesn't have to be that way. With the following tips, you can harvest tomatoes from early summer until the first hard freeze.

If you haven't set out tomato plants yet, choose hybrid, semi-determinate cultivars that produce medium-size fruit. Avoid large fruited varieties such as 'Beefsteak' and 'Big Boy'. They are sensitive to both high and low temperatures. These plants won't start growing until after the soil temperature stays above 55 F at night, and they'll stop setting fruit when daytime temperatures reach the 90s. This creates a very short harvest season.

The best time to plant tomatoes is from March 20 through early April, as soon as the soil temperature is consistently above 60 F. so if you haven't yet planted, do so quickly. In heavy clay soil, plant in raised beds 6 inches high and about 2 feet wide for better drainage and earlier warm-up in the spring.

**Variety selection** — Grow more than one variety. Check the seed packet or plant label for the letters V, F, N or A, which indicate disease resistance to verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt, nematodes and alternaria leaf spot. In North Central Texas, resistance to nematodes, fusarium wilt and alternaria are most important. Before planting, preferably when the soil is being prepared, work into the top 3 or 4 inches of soil about 2 pounds of a 15-5-10 slow-release lawn fertilizer per 100 square feet, or four to five cups of cottonseed meal.

When planting, space the plants at least 3 to 4 feet apart in the row, with rows 4 to 5 feet apart. Immediately before planting, pour one cup of a planting mixture that you can prepare into the bottom of each hole. This solution should consist of one tablespoon of high-phosphorus houseplant fertilizer dissolved in a gallon of lukewarm water. To plant, snip off the lowest leaves and set the transplants into the holes almost up to the remaining leaves. This will stimulate early root growth and hasten maturity.

**Protection** — Tomatoes grow best in cages, and the best caging material is concrete reinforcing wire. Make the cages 5 feet high and 18 to 24 inches wide. Anchor each with a 6 foot length of 1-by-2 lumber driven 1 foot into the soil and tied to the cage with wire or string. To prevent damage from wind, hard rain or hail, wrap the cages with clear plastic or a piece of lightweight fabric row cover. If there's a late frost, pull a large leaf bag over each cage to create a mini greenhouse. Remove

the extra covering as soon as the sun comes out and the temperature is above freezing. Besides protecting the plants during bad weather, both types of covering provide a warm environment that promotes early harvest.

**Mulch** — After the soil temperature is above 75 F, apply and maintain a 3-to-4-inch layer of organic mulch around the plants to prevent excess heat buildup in the soil, which reduces root efficiency and fruit production. Mulch also assists in maintaining a consistent level of soil moisture, which helps prevent blossom-end rot.

**Watering** — Adequate soil moisture is a necessity, especially during hot, dry weather. Water only when the top 1 or 2 inches of soil feels dry. Apply the water slowly and thoroughly. Ideally, the soil should stay moist to a depth of at least 6 inches. Check the soil at a depth of 2 or 3 inches under the mulch before adding water. If it is moist, postpone watering until another day. Keep the soil moist but not wet. A drip-irrigation system is the most economical and efficient way to water.

**Feeding** — If a slow-release fertilizer was applied before planting, no more should be needed until the first fruits form. From then on, the main nutrient necessary is nitrogen, which stimulates foliar growth but also is necessary for fruit production. Water fertilizer into the soil promptly and thoroughly.

Scatter 1 1/2 to two tablespoons of a lawn fertilizer such as a 15-5-10 formula in a band around the drip line of each plant. Repeat the application every two or three weeks. Select a formula that contains trace elements, as well as the major nutrients. If organic fertilizers are preferred, use three or four tablespoons of cottonseed meal, but apply it when the plants start blooming instead of after the first fruit set. The nitrogen in organic material such as cottonseed meal must be broken down by bacteria in the soil before it can be used by plants, which means that it takes longer for it to be available.

**Late summer and fall** — Around the first of July, replace weak plants or start new ones for fall harvest by planting heat-tolerant cultivars such as 'Heatwave', 'Sunmaster' or 'Viva Italia'. Each of these has very good flavor and will set fruit when temperatures are in the middle to upper 90's.

Watch carefully for signs of insect or disease problems, and, if there is a question about identification or control, contact me by email. Describe the problem and send photos if possible. You also can take samples to a County Extension office. Safe and effective pesticides have been developed in recent years for controlling most insect pests and common plant diseases. Prompt diagnosis and proper treatment are the keys to success.

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