

Tomatoes

PLANTING SEEDLINGS

Most gardeners find it convenient to buy ready grown seedlings in punnets or pots. Potting mix in punnets and pots dries out quickly so water regularly if you are not planning to plant your tomatoes straight away. Remove the seedlings from the punnet, retaining as much soil around the roots as possible.

Make sure the soil is moist otherwise it will crumble away leaving the roots exposed. You can plant tomato seedlings slightly deeper in the soil than they were in the punnet. Water new transplants as soon as possible. Where furrow watering is being used (as opposed to sprinkler watering), it's best to plant seedlings on the side of the furrow at the water level. This ensures plants get enough water as well as good drainage. Plant rows 90 to 100cm apart with at 60cm between plants. If the plants are to be trained on stakes, they can be planted about 45cm apart. Mulch with 15 to 20cm of mulching compost to help conserve moisture and suppress weed growth.

SOWING SEEDS

Tomato seed can be sown direct. A soil temperature of above 15°C is necessary for good germination. Direct seeding is best done from October to November onward. Sow seed in clumps of four to five seeds at the same spacing as for transplanting. Sow seed only 5 to 10 mm deep and lightly cover with soil. Mulch with mulching compost. Regular light waterings will be needed (daily in hot weather) for the next 10 to 14 days until seedlings emerge.

Seedlings can be thinned when plants are 2 to 3 cm high. This means that the weaker plants are removed either by pulling out or snipping off with a pair of scissors. Always leave the strongest seedling.

VARIETIES

The following varieties are suitable for growing in West Australian gardens.

Roma (Early Peel) is a moderate bush, producing small to medium egg-shaped fruit with thick flesh and excellent flavour. While the fruits are suitable for salads, they are highly regarded for bottling and sauce making because of the high solid flesh content and low acidity.

Grosse Lisse is a tall bush producing medium to large round smooth fruit. Fruit ripens to rich red and the flavour is also rich. This is a favourite which crops well into autumn.

Sunray is a hybrid bush type producing full size round fruits and the flavour is excellent.

Patio Prize Tomato: A BPA introduction with sturdy growth. Excellent crop of medium sized fruit. Ripens mid season. Very clean fruit. Maturity approx. 12 weeks. Available August-January.

Improved Apollo Tomato: Bred for early maturity, high quality flavoursome fruit. Crops in abundance over long period. Maturity approx. 12 weeks. Available August-January.

Mellow Yellow "Acid Free": this large F1 tomato is acid free. The fruit is of high yield, being heavy and solid. Mellow Yellow is a recommended variety for those people with sensitive palates. Maturity approx. 12 weeks. Available August-January.

Cherry Ripe Tomato: The big selling little cherry size tomato. Red fruit. This appetiser fruit sets in abundance, is ideal to use whole in salads, gourmet and for savoury serves. Maturity approx. 12 weeks. Available August - January.

Royal Flush Tomato: Medium sized fruit, a full flavoured, firm for keeping, suited to all applications from salads to preserves. As the name suggests, Royal Flush takes the gamble out of growing. Maturity approx. 12 weeks. Available August-January.

Beef Steak Tomato: Large fruit, often weighing over 300 grams. Excellent stake type. Fruit is clean and tasty. Maturity approx. 12 weeks. Available August-January.

Burke's Backyard: Italian tomato. Following his quest for a better tasting tomato, Don Burke selected this superb variety when in Italy. This tomato (Costoluto di Marmande) bears abundant sweet juicy tomatoes on a tall vigorous plant. It was voted "best home garden tomato" by a panel of food and gardening experts. Requires staking. Maturity approx. 12 weeks. Available August-January.

Money Maker Tomato: Versatile. Excellent home garden or field crop with built in disease resistance. Great for salads, sandwiches and cooking. Maturity approx. 12 weeks. Available August-January.

Grafted Tomatoes

Grafted tomatoes are also a good option. By joining the nematode resistant wild tomato with the high quality fruit bearing types, a grafted tomato gets to enjoy the best of both worlds. The resulting plant is terrifically vigorous and productive and you will need a sturdy trellis to support the weight of the crop. It's capable of producing enormous crops over an extended season. Fruit are medium size and have outstanding flavour characteristics.

FERTILISER

Apply a base dressing of Potato E manure at planting at the rate of about 125 grams per square metre. This encourages early root establishment. Tomatoes do well in alkaline soils so the addition of mature poultry manure will be beneficial. Alternatively you can run a band of all purpose fertiliser about 50mm to one side of the row of seedlings or seed.

FRUIT SETTING

Low night temperatures are the main cause of poor pollination and insufficient fruit set. Temperatures of at least 15°C are needed for pollination to occur. During very hot spells where temperatures exceed 38°C you often see much flower drop. This can continue for days after. Other causes of poor fruit set are shading, a lack of soil moisture, pest and disease attack and low soil fertility.

INSECTS PESTS

The tomato fruit caterpillar is the most common pest of this crop. This voracious pest grows to about 35mm long and varies in colour from green to brown. They chew leaves and burrow into the fruit. Because they are masters of camouflage it's likely that the first signs will be the damage they wreak. Control is achieved with dust containing carbaryl or spraying with "Dipel".

Harvesting the Crop. Tomatoes ripen from the base of the plant upwards. While personal preference is the chief determinant of picking time, it is worth noting that the most flavour some fruits are those that are left until fully red on the vine. It is always worth waiting for a blush of pink colour before picking as green fruits will not ripen properly. Pink fruits can be stored at room temperature where they will ripen to full red colour.

Tomatoes for processing into sauce, puree or bottling are best picked at the firm red ripe stage for maximum flavour and solids content. Tomatoes can also be frozen whole for later use in stews, casseroles and cooked dishes.

Good gardening and good eating!