Choose plants with straight, sturdy stems about the thickness of a pencil. Look for plants with 4 – 6 true leaves an even shade of green, free of insects and spots.

Seedlings in cell packs or individual pots will establish quickly after planting.

Sun and Soil

Choose a sunny, warm location and plant after the last spring frost in your area when temperatures average at least 55 - 60°F.

Tomatoes thrive in any well-drained soil with moderate fertility, and a pH of 6 - 7.

Prepare the soil.

For an excellent start, test your soil and amend as necessary. Use a general-purpose fertilizer or choose organic amendments such as blood, bone, fish or feather meal. → See Growing Tips 18 Planting a Vegetable Garden

Add organic matter, such as compost, aged manure, leaf mold or coffee grounds.

Stake, cage or mulch?

• Decide whether you will stake, cage or allow plants to run on mulch. Staked tomatoes produce cleaner fruit that ripens earlier, but must be pruned, and tied to the stake. Caged or mulched plants don’t need pruning.
• Set wooden stakes 4’ – 5’ tall, before you plant to avoid injuring the young seedlings.
• Install cages right after planting – most tomatoes require large, 24” diameter cages, 4’ – 5’ high; center carefully over the plants.
• Plant seedlings in rows 3’ apart with 18” between plants in the row if you stake or cage. If you will mulch, space rows 4’ – 5’ apart, with 3’ between plants.

How to Plant

1. Water the seedlings thoroughly, preferably with a solution of soluble fertilizer and water, about 1/2 hour before you plant.
2. Mark out where you will plant each seedling and dig a hole a few inches bigger than the root ball of the plant. Tear the rim off peat pots so that it won’t wick moisture away from the roots.

3. Set plants in the holes with the first set of true leaves just above the soil line. Roots will develop along buried stems.
4. Cover the root ball and stem with soil. Press down gently to eliminate air pockets.
5. Water the new transplants immediately with 2 quarts water. Allow the water to soak down to the roots.

Wait until the soil is thoroughly warm and plants are well established before you mulch.

Seeds or seedlings?

Plan ahead if you want to start your own seeds – they’ll need daily care to maintain the right conditions of moisture, light and warmth! Plant seeds 6 – 8 weeks before the estimated last frost date in your area.

Tomato seedlings arrive in garden centers in a dazzling array of varieties that produce particular colors, shapes, sizes and tastes. To get started, select tried and true varieties that reliably produce quality, disease-resistant, tasty crops in your area.

Plant tomatoes and - presto! – a garden. Whether in a pot, patch, or plot – tomatoes capture the essence of summer. Follow a few simple steps for a bountiful crop.