

# Guide to growing tomatoes.

John Denver sings “there’s only two things that money can’t buy, and that’s true love and homegrown tomatoes.” I’ll leave you to make up your mind on that one, but I do know that the sight of juicy red tomatoes ripening on a vine in the summer months is a gardener’s pride and joy. And, thanks to the ever-widening variety of tomato plants available, there’s sure to be a tomato right for every sunny spot, whether that be a greenhouse, a window box, a raised bed, or even indoors on your windowsill.

## Sowing and Planting

Sow from February to early April indoors, in module trays, and put somewhere warm (16–30°C) to germinate. Next to the boiler or in the laundry cupboard works well.

Germination can take a few weeks, so make sure they don’t dry out and be patient.

If you’re growing your tomatoes in a greenhouse or polytunnel, sow from late February to no later than mid-March.

For plants that will be grown outdoors, sow in March or early April. They will not be able to be planted out until all chance of frost has passed, so they cannot be sown as early as greenhouse plants.

Plant one or two seeds per module and thin to one seedling per module once germinated.

Once the roots have filled the modules, plants will need potting on into 9cm pots to grow further before being transplanted into their growing positions. If they are going to be growing outside, they’ll also need hardening off for a week before being planted.

## TOP TIPS

Tomatoes often form roots along their stems so, when you pot them on and plant them out, cut off their lower leaves and bury the stems up to the lowest set of remaining leaves. This will allow them to root from their stems underground and will create stronger plants with a much more robust root system.



Basil and French marigolds are traditional companion plants that can be grown beneficially alongside tomatoes. As well as looking completely gorgeous when grown together, basil improves the flavour of tomatoes while the pungent (and delicious!) scent of French marigolds deters whitefly – a common tomato pest.





Check whether your tomato variety is a vine or a bush. Vine tomatoes will need training up supports and pinching out, bush tomatoes can be left alone. You can get very compact bush varieties for windowsills and hanging varieties that work well in window boxes.

Keep the plant's soil consistently moist but do not overwater, especially when young. Later in the season, watering less will lead to sweeter fruit. When watering your tomatoes, water the soil, doing your best to make sure that the foliage does not get wet. This will help to prevent blight.

For plants growing indoors, keep them well ventilated by opening doors/windows. From June onwards you can leave them open day and night and plants will be very happy.

## Plant spacing

For outdoor plants, leave 45cm between plants to make sure they are not overcrowded. For indoor plants, 50cm between plants and 75cm between rows will ensure better ventilation and airflow. Plant tomatoes in single rows in your veg bed/greenhouse, or in staggered double rows. When plants are clustered and there's not enough airflow, this can lead to blight, which is bad news for your tomatoes.

## Supporting

As tomatoes grow, they need supporting. In your greenhouse, canes/sticks work well. A wire attached to both walls and the tops of the canes adds stability. As plants grow, use string to keep tying their stems to the canes with a figure of eight knot. Outside, make sure to use really sturdy supports, use thick stakes/sticks. In pots, brace these upright stakes with horizontal sticks or wire.

For the most part, bush tomatoes won't need supporting. However, if you have a particularly unruly plant, you can use a stake to prop it up.

## Pinching out

As your plants grow, you want to ensure that they put their energy into fruit production rather than leaf production.

To do this, you need to pinch out the side-shoots that form between the stem and the leaves. When plants are young, you can rub them off with your fingers and, as plants get bigger, you can snip them with secateurs/scissors, being careful not to cut the stem.



Continue pinching out side-shoots throughout the summer and, once 4-5 trusses have formed on outside plants/6-7 trusses on inside plants, pinch out the main growing point two leaves above the top truss. This will aid ripening as the plant will now be putting all of its energy into the fruit. Bush tomatoes do not need pinching out.

## Harvest

I'm sure I don't need to tell you to pick the fruits at they ripen! Make sure your last trusses of tomatoes are all harvested before the first frost is due. If they're not fully ripe at this point, not to worry – you can use them to make a delicious green tomato chutney.