

Tomato Nation: A World of Flavor (published 2025-06-28)
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With hundreds—if not thousands—of tomato varieties grown around the world, it's no surprise the humble tomato continues to be one of the most beloved and versatile garden crops. From market stalls in Europe to backyard beds across the U.S., tomatoes come in an astonishing array of sizes, shapes, colors, and flavors. Each variety has its own charm, from tiny candy-sweet cherry tomatoes to hefty slicing types perfect for sandwiches, to meaty paste tomatoes destined for sauce. The sheer diversity of tomatoes means there's a type to suit every gardener's preference and growing condition, whether you're planting in raised beds, containers, or traditional garden rows.

Cherry tomatoes are among the easiest and most prolific types to grow. Their compact fruit size makes them quick to mature, and their sweetness makes them popular for snacking right off the vine. Varieties such as 'Sun Gold,' 'Sweet Million,' and 'Black Cherry' are frequent favorites, often producing fruit from early summer through first frost. Paste tomatoes, like 'Roma' and 'San Marzano,' have fewer seeds and thicker flesh, making them ideal for sauces, purees, and canning. Slicer tomatoes, sometimes called beefsteaks, include big, juicy types like 'Brandywine,' 'Cherokee Purple,' and the giant varieties like 'Mortgage Lifter,' that average a couple pounds each. These types are grown for fresh eating where one thick slice can cover an entire sandwich.

One fundamental part of choosing a tomato variety is understanding whether it is determinate or indeterminate. Determinate tomatoes, or "bush" tomatoes, grow to a set height—usually three to four feet—then stop, producing all their fruit over a relatively short period. This trait makes them popular with home canners who want a large, concentrated harvest. Indeterminate tomatoes, by contrast, are vining and will continue to grow, flower, and set fruit until killed by frost. They tend to produce fewer fruits at once but continue to yield over a longer span, ideal for fresh eating throughout the season.

If you like a particular variety of determinate tomato but want to harvest it all season long, succession planting can be used to mimic this indeterminate trait. By planting new determinate seedlings every two to three weeks, gardeners can stagger the harvest across the growing season. This creates successive waves of determinate plants, allowing for a rolling yield of fruit without the intensive staking and pruning often required of indeterminate types.

Regardless of growth habit, supporting tomato plants is critical for airflow, disease prevention, and ease of harvest. Gardeners have several support options, each with its pros and cons. Traditional wire cages are readily available and provide 360-degree support, especially suited to determinate plants that don't grow too tall. However, they can be overwhelmed by vigorous indeterminate vines. Wooden stakes provide vertical support and are best suited for single-stem pruning systems, with plants being tied to the stake every 8–12 inches as they grow. The "Florida weave," is a method commonly used in market gardens. It involves weaving twine between posts on either side of a tomato row, creating a sandwich-like support structure. This method is efficient for managing multiple plants at once, especially determinate types with semi-compact growth.

Pruning is another key element in tomato success. For indeterminate varieties, pruning often involves removing the suckers—those small shoots that emerge at the junction of stem and branch. Left unchecked, suckers turn into additional branches, which can lead to a dense, tangled plant that is harder to manage and more prone to disease. Removing most suckers helps focus the plant’s energy on producing fruit rather than foliage, improves air circulation, and makes the plant easier to trellis. However, some gardeners choose to allow a limited number of suckers to develop into additional fruit-bearing stems, particularly in rich soil with ample support. Determinate tomatoes generally require little to no pruning. In fact, heavy pruning can reduce yields because the plant only has so many flowering nodes. Light trimming to remove diseased or damaged leaves is fine, but overall, these plants benefit from being left largely intact. Their bushy structure is part of what allows them to set fruit all at once, and aggressive pruning can interfere with this cycle.

Growing great tomatoes often means balancing growth and structure, patience and timing. It starts with choosing the right variety for your needs and ends with how you support and manage the plant over the course of the season. Whether you're harvesting pint after pint of cherries from a sprawling indeterminate vine, or bottling sauce made from the rich flesh of a determinate Roma, the satisfaction of homegrown tomatoes is a reward that spans borders, cultures, and seasons. From the sun-drenched patios of Italy to Appalachian backyard plots, tomatoes remain a shared language among gardeners—a crop as rewarding as it is diverse.

Until next time, “keep workin’ th’ dirt!”

Resources

“Grow Your Own Tomatoes and Tomatillos,” <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/pub/ec-1333-grow-your-own-tomatoes-tomatillos>

“Staking and Pruning Tomatoes in the Home Garden,” https://secure.caes.uga.edu/extension/publications/files/pdf/C%201150_3.PDF.

“Growing Tomatoes in a Home Garden,” <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/growing-tomatoes-home-garden/>

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