



How to successfully grow tomatoes

A just-picked home-grown tomato in the peak of the season far surpasses that of any bought tomato. They're the essence of summer gardening. Here is how to grow your own:

Plant out your tomato seedlings on Labour weekend

Two or three tomato plants will provide a family with a generous crop of fruit, with more than enough to give away or preserve at the peak of the season. Labour weekend is the traditional time to plant out tomato seedlings. Choose your plants carefully as they'll be with you the whole season. Look for fresh plants in individual pots. Pick them up and check underneath to make sure no roots are growing through the holes in the pot. Leaves should be green and lush – avoid seedlings that are elongated or 'drawn' from not having enough light.

Give your seedlings a gentle transition from indoor to outdoor growing. Don't be afraid to buy plants early and pot them up into larger (say 20-centimetre-diameter) containers that you can place on a sunny windowsill if it's too cold to plant them outside at first. In Wellington in particular, tomato plants will benefit from some wind shelter – at the very least a plastic bucket with the bottom cut out, pushed into the soil around the plant – for the first two weeks. It's often a good idea to delay buying some of your plants until mid-November. These may end up doing better than the early ones, and they will give you a longer fruiting season. It normally takes at least 15 weeks from planting out to harvest, which means you'll get your first fruit in mid-February in Wellington, or a few weeks earlier on the Kapiti coast.

Grow your own seedlings

An enormous number of tomato varieties are available from seed, including heirloom



Tomatoes from Rachel's Garden

or heritage varieties. These have excellent flavour, but this tends to be traded off against the high yield, uniform ripening and disease resistance of modern types.

Tomato seeds prefer warm soil (greater than 20°C) to germinate and will easily do so in less than a week at this temperature. They'll still germinate at lower temperatures, but it will take much longer (about two weeks at 15°C). Once germinated, seedlings can withstand temperatures of about 15°C but must stay above 10°C to thrive.

Where to grow your tomatoes

Plant tomatoes in the sunniest spot in your garden, as they need six to ten hours of sun per day. If you have vine tomatoes they'll fruit all season and grow up to 2 metres high. They will need good support from strings, wire or mesh on a wooden frame or bamboo-cane tepee. If you can train your tomato vines up a wall or fence, this will also give them more warmth, as the structure soaks up the heat during the day and then releases it at night. The vines won't grow well where there's competition from hedges or trees.

Bush varieties of tomato grow up to a metre high. They tend to fruit earlier than vine varieties but bear most of their fruit at the same time. There are even miniature varieties suitable for growing in pots or hanging baskets. Although it's hard to keep

these adequately watered, they may be your only option if you're short of space.

Soil in Wellington is often naturally too acidic for tomatoes, which prefer a pH of between 6.0 and 7.0, and if this is the case in your garden add some dolomite lime. The ideal preparation is to dig a trench 30 centimetres wide and deep, fill it with well-rotted compost, and then plant the tomato seedlings in the compost about 50 centimetres apart. If you do this, you probably won't need to water the plants again until they start flowering. Once flowers appear, water well weekly with comfrey or seaweed tea.

The rewards of harvest

Picking is a daily pleasure, with the cherry tomato harvest best delegated to younger members of the household. What they gain in dexterity you may lose to their tummies, but that's not such a bad trade. You may need to net your tomatoes against birds and dogs (Labradors anyway) once they start to ripen. Your home-grown fruit will be delicious whether you've grown the plain old round red tomato or experimented with yellow, orange, green, purple or striped varieties. And they might be the size of a pea or as large as a baby's head. Whatever their shape, size or colour, make sure you enjoy some of them still warm from the vine.