

Which of the Hundreds of Tomato Varieties Should I Plant?

Tomatoes are such a staple in the modern diet that it is hard to believe there was a time when this versatile fruit was once thought to be poisonous. Thankfully this member of the nightshade family has been known for centuries now to be a delicious and healthful addition to our diet and is now one of the most popular garden vegetables.

For many people, tomatoes are the most challenging, yet desirable, vegetable crop to grow. But a ripe, juicy homegrown tomato is so delicious and nutritious, people will go to great lengths to produce as many as they possibly can in their gardens. One look at the pale, hard, orange baseballs that grocery stores pass off as tomatoes will also explain why so many gardeners eagerly await the first ripe tomato from their gardens.

Considering that tomatoes are a tropical fruit native to South America, it's amazing that we can grow them at all in northern climates. Yes, the tomato is technically a fruit since it grows on a vine. There are literally hundreds of tomato varieties out there to choose from but there are only two types of tomato vines; determinate and indeterminate.

Determinate tomato varieties grow more as a bush, growing only to a certain height and producing most of their fruit all at once. Determinate varieties are most suitable for gardeners who are interested in canning tomatoes since the crop will ripen over a relatively short period of time. Determinate tomato varieties are also a good choice for gardeners with limited space available, and some determinate varieties are well suited to container growing and are an excellent choice for the patio garden.

Determinate tomato plants should never be pruned, as this will severely limit the number of blossom sets the plant can produce, thus reducing the number of tomatoes on the plant. However, an indeterminate variety will continue to grow and will keep producing fruit for the entire life of the plant, or up until frost. Each new set of blossoms will grow farther up the vine as the plant grows. Indeterminate tomato plants also require a bit more care to keep the plants manageable in the garden.

In order to keep these big plants from sprawling all over the ground and creating an impenetrable mass of foliage, indeterminate tomato varieties should be pruned and trellised. A tomato plant that is restricted to producing on only two to four main stems will still produce plenty of fruit and the tomatoes will tend to grow larger than those on an unpruned plant.

To prune an indeterminate tomato plant, simply pinch off the little shoots, or "suckers" that grow out from the main stem in the crotch between the stem and each leaf branch. Each one of these suckers can grow to become another big stem and would grow its own tomatoes and eventually grow its own suckers. But you don't want your tomato plant to waste time and energy by growing all those suckers. By pruning off most of them, the plant will devote more energy to producing ripe, juicy tomatoes.

Since you'll want more than one main stem for tomato production, allow the suckers nearest the bottom of the plant to grow. These will have more blossoms and will be easier to trellis than suckers that sprout higher up on the plant. Pruning will also improve air circulation through the plant which can help prevent disease problems, especially in humid weather.

Once you decide whether to grow determinate or indeterminate tomato varieties, it's time to peruse the garden centers or seed catalogs to find the seeds or plants that will produce your prized fruit. Although a few of the more enlightened garden centers are now selling a wider variety of tomato plants, many still offer only a few of the old standby hybrid varieties such as "Big Boy" and "Early Girl".

You'll have more varieties to choose from if you decide to start your tomato plants indoors from seed. Imagine growing tomatoes with names like "Cherokee Purple" or "Mortgage Lifter". Add more color to your favorite tomato salsa recipe with yellow "Garden Peach" tomatoes, "German Pink" or "Green Zebra". For stuffing tomatoes, try "Striped Cavern", and for salads grow some "Christmas Grape" tomatoes.

If you plan on preserving tomatoes to enjoy over winter, you will want a meatier tomato such as "Martino's Roma" or "Amish Paste" for sauces. "Wisconsin 55" and "Ace" are two varieties that are especially good for canning or freezing. There are even varieties that have a lower acid content for the folks who can't eat a high-acid tomato, and varieties that have more Vitamin C than oranges.

Tomatoes are one of the most versatile garden vegetables. There are as many ways to prepare tomatoes as there are tomato varieties. Whether you like to eat them fresh out of the garden like an apple, or you make your own spaghetti sauce or tomato salsa, whether the variety you grow is red, orange, yellow, purple, white or striped, tomatoes are the most useful and tasty garden vegetable.

Kathy Anderson has been an avid gardener for many years and has grown tomatoes by the acre, along with many other vegetables, flowers and landscape plants. Kathy recommends <http://www.freeplants.com> as a great place to learn more about gardening. Article provided by <http://gardening-articles.com>.