



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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# TEN MISTAKES TO AVOID WHEN GROWING TOMATOES

By Steve Reiners, Associate Professor of Horticultural Sciences, Cornell University

**GENEVA, NY:** Tomatoes are a multi-purpose fruit that some people will argue are vegetables. Fresh, cooked or canned, there are a multitude of different uses, although most will argue, "fresher, the better." For people with a little extra time and soil, homegrown tomatoes can't be beat. However, for those with little or no experience tending their own tomato garden, enjoying a rich harvest can be trickier than it looks. Here are the 10 most common mistakes to avoid when growing and harvesting your own tomatoes.



- 1) Choose the right variety** - Some tomato varieties are determinate type plants, meaning they may grow to about three feet in height and then stop. Others, especially most of the heirloom types, are indeterminate, meaning they will grow as high as you allow them to grow. If your space is limited, choose determinate types like Celebrity, Sunbeam or Mountain Spring.
- 2) Don't plant them too close** - Tomato plants need at least 1 1/2 feet between plants, preferably 2 feet, and that's for plants that are grown upright on stakes or cages. If no support is given and they are allowed to sprawl on the ground, tomato plants need twice as much room. Plants spaced too closely will produce few fruit and have more disease problems as the foliage stays wet. Plant according to how big they will get, not on the size of the transplants.
- 3) Plant what you can use** - I love tomatoes. My two kids and wife love tomatoes. But for us, six plants is usually more than enough, and that leaves us with enough to supply my non-tomato growing neighbors. Save room for other vegetables and flowers.
- 4) Don't plant in shady spots** - Tomato plants, like any plant that produces fruit, need at least seven hours of direct sun. If you have less, you will have fantastic foliage but very few fruit. There is nothing-repeat, nothing-that can overcome this light requirement. Fruit production takes a tremendous amount of energy, and tomato plants, like all plants, get that energy from the sun.
- 5) Feed the plants, but not too much** - Tomatoes like a balanced fertilizer, with similar amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Avoid using fertilizers that are intended for lawns. The high nitrogen will push the leaves at the expense of fruit. Look for fertilizers designed for tomatoes and follow the label directions. Or better yet, throw a shovel full of compost around the plants every other week.
- 6) Don't lose sleep over pruning** - Tomato plants will grow just fine without pruning. Pruning refers to removing the sideshoots or suckers that come off the main shoot. Pruning will help control the size of the plant and can keep the plants more manageable, which is usually desirable in a small garden. Pruning will result in slightly fewer total fruit but the fruit will be slightly larger. You will likely get more but slightly smaller

fruit from non-pruned plants. Do what you're comfortable with.

**7) Keep the plants well watered** - When the soil around tomato plants dries out, a serious problem results. Calcium, one of the handful of minerals needed by all plants to grow, is absorbed by the plant's roots along with water. If water is limited, so is calcium. The result is blossom-end rot, a brown, dry, leathery spot found on the bottom of fruit. Don't be fooled by magic remedies that promise to fix this. Special fertilizers, egg shells or a Tums tablet placed next to the plant won't make a difference. Only water will make the difference. So make sure your soils don't dry out and use mulch to help conserve moisture.

**8) Don't remove leaves or branches from mature plants with fruit** - Some people think that tomato fruit need direct sunlight to ripen. This is untrue. Pruning the plant prior to fruiting is fine, as discussed earlier, but never remove foliage from a mature plant. This exposes fruit to direct sun and can lead to sunscald, a yellowing of the side exposed to the sun. The same holds true for green fruit you are ripening inside. Do not put them on a sunny windowsill. Instead put them in a paper bag and place them out of direct light.

**9) Identify your pest problems** - Remember, it's normal to see insects on your plants and chances are, most of them are not doing any harm. And every year, diseases will cause some yellowing and browning. But you should get more than enough fruit to satisfy your needs even with some pest damage. At the very least, learn to identify common tomato pests so that you can take appropriate action. Use chemicals as a last resort.

**10) Don't put fruit in your refrigerator** - You've done everything right and now it's time to pick the first fruit, but don't be tempted to put that fruit in the refrigerator. Temperatures below 55F will destroy the fragile balance of sugars, acids and other flavor inducing compounds. Leave tomatoes at room temperature, away from direct sunlight. If you want them to ripen faster, put them in a brown paper bag.

*Stephen Reiners is associate professor of horticultural sciences at Cornell University, at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY. His field research is designed to maintain and enhance the profitability and sustainability of New York vegetable farmers with an emphasis on processing crops such as sweet corn, cabbage, beets and peas. For more information from Dr. Reiners on tomatoes, link to [http://www.nysaes.cornell.edu/pubs/ask/tomatoe\\_qa.html](http://www.nysaes.cornell.edu/pubs/ask/tomatoe_qa.html)*

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