

TOMATOES & PEPPERS

A Garden Guide

Tomatoes and Peppers are in the *Solanaceae* family and like similar growing conditions. Tomatoes are thought to be native to the Andes in South America; Peppers are thought to be native to Central or South America. These tropical plants both like 6-10 hours (the more the better) of direct sunlight and rich, loose, well-draining soil. Add generous amounts of organic matter if needed and work it 6" deep into the soil. To give transplants a good start, work in a pre-planting application of fertilizer.



Organic fertilizers and mycorrhizae can increase soil and plant health. We carry multiple options in our Garden Shop, where staff will be happy to assist. If not selecting ones specifically designed for tomatoes and peppers, you may need to add additional calcium. A soil test will tell you exactly how much fertilizer to use, otherwise follow the instructions on the product label.

If growing from seed, tomatoes will germinate best at a range of 65-85°F. Peppers will germinate best around 75-85°F. Heat mats can be very helpful.

The best time to transplant is on a cloudy day, or in the morning or evening hours to lessen stress on the plants. Watch the weather and plant around Mother's Day. If the plants were grown entirely indoors, they'll need a period of gentle hardening off, where every few days they are exposed to more direct sunlight. This can range from 3-7 days. Indoor plants immediately planted outdoors on a sunny day may burn.

Space staked or trellised tomatoes 1-2' apart in rows 3' apart. Leave 3' between caged tomatoes. For peppers, set plants 18-24" apart, leaving 2-3' between rows. Avoid crowding your plants - this will help to prevent diseases later in the season. Add 3" mulch to help maintain soil moisture, reduce weeds, decrease diseases spreading, and keep fruit clean. Install the support of your choice at planting time to avoid disturbing the tender root systems later.

Determinate vines produce and ripen fruit all at once. These are ideal for food preservation, since you have a large harvest that can be processed all at once. Paste tomatoes in particular are known for being meatier and ideal for making sauce.

Indeterminate vines produce small amounts continuously, often until frost. These are excellent to eat continually in smaller amounts, such as slicing tomatoes for



sandwiches, or cherry tomatoes for salads. Careful **pruning** of suckers - the little branches that grow in the “V” between the main stem and branch - on indeterminate plants can increase tomato production.

Heirloom plants have been passed down through the generations, and are known for their delicious flavors. These are great for seed saving.

Hybrids have been bred to have disease resistance and higher productivity. These do not breed true, so are not good candidates for seed saving.

Maintaining plant health

Water and fertilize plants at the base of the plant, avoiding the foliage. Watering in the morning is ideal. Ruthlessly prune out anything that doesn't look healthy, any branches that may touch the ground, and to improve air flow. Remove nearby weeds that will compete with your plants for water, nutrients, and can possibly spread diseases to your plants. Don't forget to mulch!

Tomatoes and peppers need 1-2” of water per week. During periods of drought supplemental watering may be necessary. Inconsistent watering can lead to health issues, such as calcium blossom end rot.



If you are struggling with health issues in your plants, look for the **disease resistant** varieties. Our signs in the Vegetable Department will indicate which of our tomato starts are known for their disease resistance.

Harvesting



Harvest tomato plants by selecting fully colored fruits that feel heavy yet have a slight softness. If you need to harvest fruits early, you can keep them in a brown paper bag to mature.

Watch peppers and harvest when they have the desired coloring. If you see stretch marks, aka corking, this is perfectly natural, and does not impact flavor, although it can be a sign that the pepper is nearing ripeness. Some cooks prefer the aesthetic of corked peppers.

