

7 Tips - Before You Sow!

A brief guide - before getting started



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1. Grow varieties that do well in your part of the world.

There are hundreds of tomato varieties on sale, many with long Italian names that are difficult to pronounce. Funny enough, if it's difficult to pronounce, it's probably difficult to grow too!

The reason is, Italian varieties, and those that do best in the southern Mediterranean, usually prefer consistent warm weather and it's unlikely that they will be happy in a wet and unsettled summer.

Here are a few Italian varieties that I would not recommend you grow in your first season, especially if growing in a short season area such as the UK.

- Costoluto Fiorintino
- Costoluto Genovese sel Valente
- Cuor di Bue – Oxheart

A safer choice in a cooler area would be:

- Gardener's Delight
- Moneymaker or Alicante
- Sungold
- Black Cherry

A way to find out which varieties do best in your area is to check the seed catalogues, ask someone who already grows tomatoes or the staff at your local garden centre. Each spring garden centres sell seedlings of popular varieties – they are popular because they are successful.

If you have a greenhouse, you'll get more consistent and higher temperatures, and are much more likely to produce a good crop from the Mediterranean varieties.

The Tom-Tato Plant

A quick tip about the tomato / potato plant. Although it is fun to grow, you will get a better crop from growing tomatoes and potatoes on separate plants!

To sum up ...

Unless you are an experienced grower, it's best to stick to the popular varieties – the ones that do well each season in your area.



Sungold, Black Cherry and Tumbling Tom – all easy to grow and taste fabulous!

2. Cherry varieties are most likely to succeed.

Cherry tomato plants are the ones most likely to produce a good harvest in a poor summer and are ideal if you are new to growing tomatoes or if you haven't had much success in previous seasons.

Tall Varieties

Tall, indeterminate tomato plants such as Sungold and Gardener's Delight are ideal in grow bags and wide based containers that won't blow over easily on a windy day. Of course tall varieties will need support – canes or support string is ideal.

Recommended tall, indeterminate varieties (these need side shoots removed).

- Gardener's Delight
- Black Cherry
- Sungold

Bush Varieties

Cherry tomatoes of the bush variety are best grown in high sided containers or in hanging baskets. Cascading or trailing types such as Tumbling Tom are ideal for high containers.

Recommended bush varieties (these won't need their side shoots removed).

- Tumbling Tom – red or yellow
- Maskotka
- Red Alert
- Tumbler

To sum up ...

Cherry varieties are the ones most likely to succeed.

3. Growing Large Varieties

Most of these are mid to late season varieties which means that they take longer to mature than many of the cherry varieties above.

If you live in a short season area such as the UK, experience is needed to get a good harvest of ripe fruit by the end of the season - before the temperatures drop and plants stop growing.

These include:

- Brandywine
- Hillbilly Potato Leaf
- Mortgage Lifter
- Cherokee Purple
- The Italian varieties mentioned above

It's great to grow large tomatoes but even in ideal conditions, they will be much fewer in number than when growing medium or cherry varieties.

One larger variety that does well in cooler conditions is Oregon Spring. I've grown this bush variety in large containers for many years and it is very reliable.

A popular large variety in the UK is Marmande but you will need a good summer to produce a reasonable crop.

Hybrid F1 varieties are often more vigorous than heirloom open pollinated plants and are a good choice in short season areas.



Black Sea Man – a large variety with a wonderful taste, but needs a good summer to produce a good crop when growing outside.

To sum up ...

Large varieties usually take longer to mature and are more difficult to grow.

4. Sowing too early or too late

This is one of the most common mistakes to make.

Sowing too early puts seedlings and plants under stress because of low light and cooler conditions. Growing in poor conditions may cause the following:

- Not enough light so seedlings may become leggy.
- Cooler temperatures early in the season means that tomato plants are unable to absorb all the nutrients they need.
- Wide fluctuation in day/night temperatures so flowers are slow to set fruit.
- Damp and cold conditions makes them vulnerable to fungal disease.

The problems listed above can be easily avoided if seeds are sown at the right time. Which is around eight to ten weeks before your last frost date.

If your last frost date is the end of May, a good time to sow would be the middle to the end of March.

Of course if you sow a quick maturing (early) variety like Red Alert, it can be sown in late April and still produce a good crop before the end of the season.

Sowing most varieties too late in the season will mean that plants won't have enough time to reach maturity and produce ripe tomatoes. Green tomato chutney is a very popular recipe!

A poor summer will also slow the growth of plants.

To sum up ...

Sowing at the right time means better growing conditions but fruit should still mature before the end of season.

5. Buy good quality seeds

Discounted seeds are sometimes near their "sell by date" or packed two or three seasons ago.

Although a tomato seed can germinate up to ten years after being saved if kept in the right conditions, a seed fresh from last season's tomatoes will be much more vigorous and produce a healthier and more abundant plant.

On the front cover of this ebook there is a picture of seed packets purchased from a discount store in the UK. Unfortunately, I have found some of these seeds to be low in vigour with a low level of germination.

This will vary from season to season because each batch of seeds is likely to be from a different stock, but in my view, it is worth paying a little extra and buying better quality seeds from a seed company.

Rather than sowing a whole packet in one go, it's a good idea to sow a few seeds at a time in a small pot or small tray.

This way, if they don't germinate for some reason, you'll have more seeds and be able to do another sowing.

Also, sowing too many seeds in a small space will result in overcrowding and leggy seedlings when they compete for light with each other.

It will take between 5 to 10 days for germination and a further three weeks before the seedlings need to be transplanted into their own individual pots.

To sum up ...

Buy best quality seeds and sow in batches ... a few at a time.

6. Use fresh compost for germination

Garden soil usually contains disease and insects that will eat young seedlings – using fresh seed, multipurpose or potting compost is best.



When buying a bag of compost at a garden centre, make sure that it hasn't been out in the rain during the winter and the contents wet.

Nutrients in compost deteriorate over time, so new compost is always best.

Jiffy plugs are a good alternative and so are sponges.



Jiffy plugs are available in a propagator pack and available at a reasonable price.

Sponges are arguably the best sowing medium but they are more expensive than most other methods of germination and won't make a huge difference.



Other germinating media include:

Perlite

Vermiculite

Coir – coconut shell

Rockwool

Some gardeners mix seed compost, vermiculite and perlite together to make a custom mix.

It's a case of trying these media and finding out which ones you prefer - they are all good!

To sum up ...

It's best to use fresh soil/compost to avoid diseases etc.

7. Over watering

It is very easy to be too generous with water and kill your seedlings with kindness.

After sowing the seeds in a seed tray or whatever you are germinating the seedlings in, water from below to avoid compacting the compost and disturbing the seedlings.

If for some reason watering from below is not possible, use a spray mister to gently wet the seed compost from above.

After they have germinated, it is best not to water them unless the compost is very dry. Over watering seedlings, especially in cool, damp conditions is likely to result in fungal disease.

Soil that is just moist (and not wet) will encourage roots to grow in search of water and food – that's good because it will develop a good root system.

Feeding seedlings is unnecessary as there should be enough nutrients in the seed compost to keep them fed for a few weeks. After around three or four weeks in a seed tray, they can then be transplanted into individual pots.

To sum up ...

Over watering reduces root growth and encourages fungal disease.

Final Thoughts

I hope you've found these tips useful and I hope the advice will help avoid one or two of the pitfalls when getting started.

Knowing about tomato plants and what they like and dislike, will go a long way towards being successful. Even in a poor summer, it's still possible to get a good crop by choosing the right varieties for your area.

For lots more tips and tricks for a great tomato harvest please visit:

www.tomatogrowing.co.uk

About The Author

Nick Chenhall is an experienced tomato grower who has run a tomato growing website for over fifteen years and has been growing tomatoes for nearly thirty years.

Nick has given advice on local radio, he writes guest articles for blogs, websites and online magazines.

He is also regularly asked to test and review products related to growing tomatoes. Nick provides a free online newsletter from his website, which runs from February to October each season at: <http://www.tomatogrowing.co.uk/>

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www.tomatogrowing.co.uk

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