

A Year in the Edible Garden

A month-by-
month guide to
growing and
harvesting
vegetables, herbs
& edible flowers

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Tomatoes

It's indisputable: a homegrown tomato—of the right variety—always tastes best. It has that strange tobacco fragrance in its flavor that shop-bought ones rarely retain. This is incentive enough to grow them in my view, but there are also few nicer tasks than going into the greenhouse (or at Perch Hill, also along the sunny, south-facing bank where we grow easy-ripening cherry tomatoes) and filling a bowl with a load of tomatoes, enjoying that extraordinary, acrid scent that fills the air as you pick. It's one of life's good experiences: pick, plop, pick, plop, working down the line.

Another great thing is that you don't have to have a garden to grow them. A sunny, sheltered doorstep or, with the right tumbling, bush varieties, a good window box are both fine places to grow these fruits. When I lived in London, I grew tomatoes in a deep window box every year. Even if I lived on the fiftieth floor of a high-rise building, I'd still grow tomatoes.

With tomatoes, almost more than any vegetable we grow, I think it's key to be super selective in your varieties. In my experience, even with homegrown, there's a big difference in the volume of harvest and intensity of flavor among different tomatoes. We've found over the years that there are tasty tomatoes, super-tasty tomatoes, and tomatoes with almost no flavor at all. That's why a tomato taste trial was one of the first edible trials we did here over 20 years ago. We've repeated it four or five times since. I want us to keep up to date, growing new varieties as they come on the market and comparing them with our stalwarts.

It's also important to grow several varieties. Any decent cook will tell you it's best to have a mix of tomatoes in any dish, raw or cooked. Each one has a different level of sweetness and acidity, and together this gives a greater depth of flavor, as well as looking more interesting on the plate.

I remember visiting the National Trust garden Knightshayes in Devon where the gardeners were growing ordinary red cherry tomatoes, as well as orange ones. Both of these were served in the

Tomatoes in the greenhouse, including "Noire de Crimée," and "Country Taste." Most of the lower leaves have been removed by August to encourage good air circulation and to decrease the chance of blight.



self-service café, though separately, on the same salad. The plates with the orange outsold the ones with the red tomatoes by more than double. When the customers who'd bought the orange ones were asked why, almost all said it was because they assumed the red had been bought in, whereas the more unusual orange variety had been grown right there in the garden. In fact, both were grown there.

Growing different-colored varieties is an easy thing to do, and with it comes the message "I'm homegrown, and fresher, tastier, and healthier than the others." It's true you can get mixed colors and shapes at fancy produce stores in bougie little cardboard baskets, but, in my experience they often don't taste as good as they look.

My favorite all-round variety is good old "Sungold." It's hard to beat with its intense sweetness, pretty orange-yellow skin, and huge productivity from the end of June. I'd still recommend the large cherry variety, "Gardener's Delight," which has good flavor and a handily long, light cropping pattern. You can go on eating from your "Gardener's Delight" plants for at least 3 months if they are grown inside. The variety has another advantage: its fruits ripen on one vine at much the same time. The first fruit nearest the

Opposite Tomato "Red Alert" and basil "Sweet Genovese."

Below Tomatoes growing outside in a line alongside the south face of the greenhouse. It's very sheltered here.





Clockwise from top left

A mix of tomatoes (including “Green Zebra”) ready for roasting; tomatoes “Noire de Crimée” and “Indigo Rose”; a harvest of our outdoor tomatoes, including “Noire de Crimée,” “Stupice,” “Sungold,” and “Gardener’s Delight.”

plant turns red and sweet only a couple of days before the one at the tip, so you can harvest the whole vine and roast all the tomatoes together, which looks good on the plate and tastes great.

I always add the strange-looking, but utterly delicious “Noire de Crimée” (or similar “Black Russian,” which can be easier to find) to my growing list every year. It is outstanding eaten raw with a sprinkle of flaky salt in a salad. In fact, I’d say this was my favorite-ever salad tomato.

Classification

Tomato varieties divide into so-called “determinate” or “bush” types and “indeterminate” or “cordon” types.

Indeterminate tomato plants (also known as cordon) are the vine varieties. They grow tall and will keep going until you tell them to stop by pinching off the growing tip. They will need training and their side shoots need pinching off (see p. 202). Bear in mind there is no point in having them so tall that you can’t reach the fruit, so be practical when deciding when to take off the tip.

Determinate tomato plants (also known as bush) are the bushy, often more compact varieties. They get to a certain size and then stop climbing/growing, instead bushing out and starting to flower and crop heavily—usually, for a shorter season than indeterminate varieties. The advantage of the determinates is that you don’t need to train them or pinch off the lateral shoots. I love the pinching part, but it can be a bit of a chore and puts beginner growers off tomatoes. These are ideal for pots, window boxes, and edible hanging baskets, though bear in mind they may still need to be supported with a stake. Do note that the determinate group divides into bush and trailing types according to their natural habit. Bush forms need a cane to support them and are very bushy in their growth habit, while the trailers are shorter and have a tendency to trail.



Best of the tomatoes

These are our stalwart tomatoes (Solanum lycopersicum), but any tomato grower will have their own favorites. I'd advise to trial, trial, trial. To build up your own list of favorites, select two or three this year, stick with one or two of those next year, and trial a new one every year. Select three or four from any on the following pages and you will never want to buy a supermarket tomato again.

Indeterminate

1 "Chocolate Cherry"

A new, trendy, brownish-skinned tomatoes, this one is prolific and an eat-in-one-go size. It did well in our trial outdoors and cropped heavily, almost as well as in the greenhouse. The downside is its flavor, which is nice but not outstanding.

2 "Costoluto Fiorentino"

This is the handsomest tomato—a cartoon-looking, Mediterranean market tomato. Its name means "pleated of Florence," and that's just what it is. It has good flavor, if not quite as good as "Noire de Crimée." It has a tendency to lose its leader and go blind as it grows, so sometimes you need to train a lower axillary shoot (not pinched, obviously) to become the leader. Despite that, we grow it every year.

3 "Country Taste"

This is of the heaviest cropping beefsteak tomatoes we've trialed, with succulent, intensely flavored fruit. It's excellent sliced or chunked for salad. It is a recent addition to our must-grow list.

4 "Gardener's Delight"

A classic that produces fruit that's somewhere between a cherry and a medium-sized tomato, it is reliable, sweet, tasty, prolific, and grows happily outside.

5 "Green Zebra"

This one has good flavor, but we mainly grow it because it makes a tomato salad look fantastic when it's combined with red, orange, and dark varieties, plus it is juicy and not too sweet.

6 "Indigo Rose"

Tomatoes are the richest source of a powerful and important antioxidant called lycopene. This blue-black tomato contains good levels of anthocyanin too (famously good for our brains and the pigment that gives blueberries their color), so it is an extra-healthy option. The flavor is good but not exceptional, but these tomatoes are among the latest to ripen, which helps to lengthen the tomato harvesting season.

7 "Noire de Crimée"

This is a beefsteak-sized tomato that's worth growing for its exceptional flavor, texture, and reliability. It comes from Russia and is tolerant of the northern hemisphere's light levels and temperatures. It has delicious flavor and juicy firm flesh. My number one.







8 “Orange Banana”

This is a tall indeterminate type that grows to 2 m (6 ½ ft.) or more if you let it, with very little leaf compared to stem. It makes it look oddly gappy as it grows, but it’s a huge producer even in quite bad light levels. We tend to grow this one right up to the eaves of the greenhouse and then train it sideways. The fruit is medium to large (150 to 200g/ 5 to 7oz per tomato), with excellent flavour and texture, and a great shape. It starts to crop early and continues to the first frost.

9 “San Marzano”

Year after year, we try plum tomatoes. The trouble with most plum types is that they are bred for cooking, canning, and bottling, and tend to be quite dry with a grainy texture and are not so good eaten raw. That’s certainly true of this one, the foodies’ favorite “San Marzano,” which I don’t think can compete with the others here in terms of flavor. However, if you love regularly making tomato sauce, this is your tomato.

10 “Santonio”

This is a cherry plum we tried in 2020: delicious, juicy, and sweet but with a good sharpness. This is among our top three tomatoes to grow at Perch Hill.



11 “Stupice”

A prolific, so-called potato-leaved cordon type from the Czech Republic. The fruit is small to medium-sized (about 125g per tomato), with very thin-skinned, it does not crack and has a sweet but gentle flavor. We grow lots here.

“Stupice” (or “Stupicke Polni Rane” as it’s also known) is very early to fruit (from mid-June in the greenhouse), prolific until September (one plant will produce about 10 kilos of fruit), and is the last to succumb to blight, so it can also be grown reliably outside too.



12 “Sugar Plum”

A cherry plum, sweet, thin-skinned and very prolific (you’ll also find it sold under “Red Grape Sugar Plum”), this is our head gardener Josie’s favourite.

It was in the top three of our recent taste test. Everyone liked it for its strong tomato flavor that’s sweet but not overly so, and for its firm, not mushy, texture. It has a slight acidity running through it, which all sweet tomatoes need. It ripens quite late compared to “Sungold” and produces for a long period of time. It’s lovely in a mixed salad with the larger varieties.





13 “Sungold”

A small cherry form with thin, yellow-orange skin and an exceptionally sweet flavor, it is the longest and biggest cropper in our greenhouse every year and wins almost every taste trial. It also grows happily outside. As with produce that crops early, having a tomato that crops into autumn (when those you can buy from the shops have become tasteless) feels like a luxury. “Honeycomb” is a more recent, similar variety that seemed to be even sweeter in our last taste trial.

14 “Tigerella”

There are a couple of medium-sized tomatoes that I particularly like—“Tigerella” being one of them. Its skin has a greenish tinge, even when fully ripe, and pretty flecks and stripes in dark red. For a crunchy, firm salad tomato, or for slicing into sandwiches, this is the best. My twin sister has grown this in her greenhouse in Edinburgh for 2 years squiddy so I know it does well in the north of the UK too. Here in the south, it’s happy inside or out.





Determinate

1 “Red Alert”

If you don’t have a greenhouse and have limited space or maybe just a window box, “Red Alert” is a good choice. It’s happy growing outside, is a tumbler and needs no training. It will produce vast amounts of relatively tasty fruit. It outshines all other tumblers, I’ve tried in terms of flavor, including “Tumbling Tom.”

2 “Texas Wild Cherry”

Producing masses of tiny, so-called “currant” tomatoes, this quick-growing tumbling variety is ideal if you’re a cook who loves scattering tomatoes through things like risottos and tabbouleh. The downside is you really need to pick these almost daily. We also like picking whole branches

for vases in the style of a Dutch still life. We also grow the plants in terra-cotta pots as table centers for our events and garden openings. To do this, we grow them sort of bonsaied, reducing their bulk by removing some of their leaves so they look delicate and elegant.

3 “Tumbling Tom”

The first tomato I grew was in a window box in my London garden. I was training to be a doctor at Charing Cross Hospital and short of time. I failed to pick my heavy-cropping “Tumbling Tom” regularly enough. Overripe fruit dropped on the pavement below, which stained it red right through to the following spring. It tastes good, but I grow it mostly for nostalgia.



June Tomato Care

My favorite early-morning job for June, whatever the weather (as this is almost always in the greenhouse), is pinching off, training, and sometimes feeding our tomatoes.

Pinching side shoots and defoliating

We keep on top of pinching off the side shoots of indeterminate (cordon) tomatoes. Toward the end of June, particularly if there's any hint of aphids or whitefly, we will start defoliating. This means removing the leaves up to the first truss (flowering/fruiting stem). As the weeks go on through July and August, we remove more and more leaves to help with good air circulation and better fruit ripening.

Determinate (bush) tomatoes don't need pinching or defoliating, but do check which form you're growing before you settle on how to train (or not train) it. See p. 258 for definitions.

Training

You can train tomatoes in various ways. You can support indeterminate varieties with a cane at their side (pictured on p. 200), regularly tying them in. Alternatively—and this is what we now do at Perch Hill—you can secure a length of twine (we use hop-bine string because it is thick and strong) at the base of the plant and also on to a pole above it. We use ring-culture pots so we secure the bottom end of the string to a small hole in the pot and top end to a pole of rebar,

supported within a frame. For more on setting up a frame and ring-culture pots, see p. 160.

The tomatoes are planted close to the string, and as they grow, two to three times a week, we pinch off the axillary buds and twist the leader (the top shoot) around the string, so the vine is strongly supported as it grows. You can spot the axillary buds and shoots, even when they've grown quite long, as they are usually a brighter, fresher green.

Once a tomato vine reaches the top (usually in late June or even July), we pinch off the tip to encourage fruit development and ripening.

Cherry tomato training

We also train our cherry tomatoes, particularly “Sungold,” in a specific way. This variety is such a long cropper, still lovely to eat right into winter, that we don't follow the usual technique of pinching out the tip. Instead, we leave our plants to reach the eaves of the greenhouse and then (where we would usually pinch off) we allow the leader and then two side shoots to develop at eaves' level, and we don't pinch those either.

The main stem continues to grow straight up and over the tomato support frame, but will need pinching soon, before it gets too tall and out of picking range. The side shoots we train by turning both at right angles to the main stem, in opposite directions to each other. By mid-autumn, we'll have harvested all the fruit from the vines at the lower level, but with these three continuing shoots still cropping, we're often picking “Sungold” from up in the air until the middle of November.

Pinching out a tomato plant's axillary shoots.



Watering

For tomatoes in the greenhouse, we drip water from our irrigation system into the inner circle of the ring-culture pots for 2 hours every morning for a week to get the new tomato plants growing. Then, we move the drip waterer to the outside ring where it's on for 3 hours through the rest of June and July. From August, we cut down the drip watering to hour a day so that the ripening fruit has more flavor. If you don't have an irrigation system, use a drench system, such as a rubber pipe with lots of tiny holes in it (or, in our case, a pipe with regularly spread water jets)

left on for several hours just once a week. Then, you can almost forget the plants until you see the first fruits in July, when you will need to decrease the watering.

Feeding

All these fruiting plants need a regular potash-rich feed. Feed when they start flowering and every 10 days or so. We have experimented with other methods. One year, we didn't feed the tomatoes at all, but instead spread 4-year-old manure at a depth of about 10 cm (4 in.) around the plants. The results were fantastic, with no yellowing leaves on the plants.

Blight

Blight is a disease that affects the fruit of tomato plants, resulting in rot. Keeping tomatoes free from blight depends on a few things. The first is the variety you are growing. Certain varieties seem to have better natural resistance to blight, such as "Stupicke Polni Rane." The second factor is under-cover protection. We have not had blight on our tomatoes here for 20 years because we grow them inside. And, finally, good air circulation is crucial, which is why defoliating the bottom of the plant is a good idea. It helps prevent fungal spores proliferating by reducing the risk of a humid, moist environment.