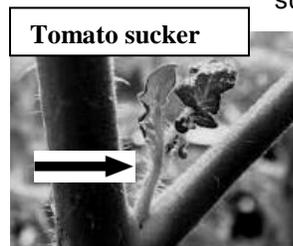


Supporting Your Tomatoes

Tomatoes continue to be our most popular garden vegetable. However, garden tomatoes often need some sort of support. Letting the heavy tomatoes lie on the ground encourages rotting and disease. Staking or supporting them protects the heavy tomatoes and confines the plants to a smaller area, rather than letting them sprawl all over.

Tomato varieties have been divided into two general categories.

Determinate, or “bush” tomatoes produce compact plants which can grow up to 4 feet tall, depending upon variety. Some determinate tomato plants are quite small (dwarf, miniature, or patio types) and are suitable for pots or hanging baskets. Many determinate tomatoes stop growing

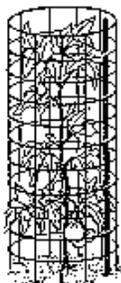


when fruit starts setting on the topmost buds of the plant. The plants tend to ripen all at once or over a short time period (2 weeks or less). Then the plants die. However, some determinate tomatoes have been bred to have an extended production period. A small plant size does not necessarily mean a small fruit size, as many determinate varieties produce tennis-ball or larger size fruit. Determinate tomatoes may require little or no staking for support. Some dwarf types, when grown out in the garden, tend to sprawl or droop as fruit enlarges; these may benefit from some support or mulch to keep the fruit clean. Determinate varieties should not be suckered or pruned, as this severely limits fruit production.

Indeterminate, or “vining” tomato varieties will continue growing, blooming, and fruiting until frost. The vines may reach 12 feet or longer, depending on variety. A large size plant does not necessarily mean a large size fruit. In my experience, some pea-size or cherry-size varieties produce massive vines. Some sort of cage or staking will be needed to keep the fruit off of the ground. Removal of suckers, the side shoots that grow in the crotch between the stem and a branch, is done by many gardeners but is not absolutely necessary. Removal of suckers will result in bigger fruit but smaller overall yield. Fruit tends to sunburn more quickly in such plants.

Plant your tomatoes deeply, removing lower leaves and letting just the top leaves peek out of the soil. Tomatoes will set roots all along the buried stem and a strong root system will develop. Mulch to retain moisture and to kill weeds. My wife Jennifer lays strips of cardboard around the tomatoes and covers that with a layer of wood chips, dry grass from herbicide-free lawns, chopped leaves, or straw mulch. (Be careful **NOT** to use chopped walnut leaves, as they contain a substance (juglone) that is very toxic to tomato plants).

One method of supporting tomatoes is to drive a 6 foot or longer stake at least 12 inches deep next to the plant. Use wood, straight branches, bamboo, rebar, or plastic coated bamboo poles. As the plant grows, loosely tie the stem to the stake with twine or twist ties. In this method, all suckers are removed (weekly) and the plant is trained to a single stem. Cross bars may be added to the stakes for added stability.



Tomato cages can be constructed from concrete reinforcing wire. This comes in rolls and can be carefully cut to size. The wire is usually 5 feet tall and should be carefully cut (hacksaw or heavy duty wire cutters) to produce a cage 24-30 inches in diameter. Use eye protection and heavy gloves to prevent injury when working. Wire the edges of the cage together. Place the completed cage over the tomato and secure the cage with 2 or 3 stakes to keep the cage steady during wind storms. The plants can grow freely, without pruning, and the ripening tomatoes are easily picked through the large openings in the cages.

Commercial growers drive stakes at intervals in their rows and then weave twine throughout the plants to support them. Some gardeners support extension ladders horizontally on concrete blocks, and let the tomatoes sprawl over the ladders. The commonly available tomato cages, available at all big box stores, tend to be flimsy and too small to support large, indeterminate tomato plants. They do work for determinate tomato plants and for garden flowers, however.

Good luck and an abundant crop.

Happy gardening,
Joe Baltrukonis