

Order tomato seeds now – but don't start them

It's winter, and for many gardeners, that means thoughts of tomatoes.

While many buy tomato seedlings from a garden store, others start their own from seed.

Before you order seeds, there are a few things to consider. Look at the information provided in the catalog. Is the tomato plant you're considering determinate or indeterminate? Determinate plants set fruit and basically stop growing until the fruit is gone.

For the home gardener, the only reason to grow determinate plants is if you are going to make tomato paste or sauce, and need all the fruit to ripen at once. In most cases, hybrid plants are determinate and are deliberately bred for fast growth and quick fruit set.

Indeterminate plants keep growing and producing fruit all summer long. These are the plants to grow if you want a tomato for salad on Tuesday, another for Sunday and yet another for eating the next Saturday.

You should also look at the letters after the tomato. Most often, you will see VFN or VFT. V means that the tomato is resistant to Verticillium wilt. F means the plant is resistant to Fusarium Wilt. N means it is resistant to nematodes, and T means the plant is resistant to Tobacco Mosaic wilt. All these diseases can cut the production of tomatoes on your plants, so never plant tomatoes where you planted them – or potatoes – last year. Move tomato plants to a new spot each season.

Also, consider the season. Early-season tomatoes tend to be smaller, faster growing and not as tasty as mid or late-season fruit. If you crave an early vine-ripened tomato, grow a bush or two of early-season hybrids such as Early Wonder or Early Girl. Both are determinate, but you can get fruit in 55 to 60 days. If you plant them in a greenhouse, you might be able to get fruit by the end of May or mid-June.

Mid-season tomatoes tend to be tastier, larger and take between 70 and 80 days to ripen. Typical mid-season varieties are Better Boy, Big Boy and some of the beefsteaks. One of the mid-season varieties that I like to plant is Rutgers. The tomatoes are about two to three inches across and quite tasty, plus there are usually a lot of them on the vine.

Late-season varieties tend toward larger fruit. Most take around 80 days to ripen. Beefsteak varieties can take around 80 to 85 days to ripen. If you plant late-season varieties in a greenhouse, you can usually get fruit until Thanksgiving or even Christmas, if they are protected from frost.

So what should you plant? It depends on how much space you have. Ideally, plant one or two of early, mid and late-season types for continuous harvesting from June onward.

For each tomato plant, allow an area of at least 2' x 2'. That's a lot of space if you have a small garden. But there are a few tricks you can use to get more fruit in a smaller space.

If you grow against a wall, fence or trellis, train the tomato up the structure. Tomatoes grown up a structure set fruit a little later than those left to sprawl on the ground, but the fruit is protected from slugs and insects.

If you only have space on a



The Island Garden

By Roger Marshall

patio, grow tomatoes in a large hanging basket or other container. Grow the bush varieties that are bred for compact growing areas. Another trick I use is to grow to-

matoes around a small cage. I find that I can plant four or five plants around a 24-inch diameter cage made of four-foot-high concrete reinforcing mesh. The plants grow taller than the cage and need to be tied to it.

Finally, do not start your seeds now, unless you have a greenhouse. You need to plant your seeds about six to eight weeks before the last frost – around the middle to the end of March. So be patient and wait. The taste of that first luscious fruit will come soon enough.

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