



Top Ten Tips for Tasty Tomatoes in Shoreline

Article by Londa Jacques

Indescribable is the taste of a warm, sun-kissed tomato eaten right out of the garden. And if that first tomato is from **your** garden, you're sure to become a gardener for life. Believe it or not, you CAN do it. Growing tomatoes from seed or transplants is not that difficult. Most commercially-grown tomatoes come from a distance of 1,000 miles away or more, and may take a week or more before they arrive in local grocery stores. Moreover, they are shipped green, so none will ever have that sun-ripened flavor. Even a locally grown tomato will lose flavor before it makes it to your table. **Romas**, those nearly flavorless, off-season standbys that pervade the produce aisle for three seasons of the year, are amazingly flavorful when eaten right off the vine from your own patch.

Here are few tips for assuring success, even for the first-time gardener.

1) Tomatoes **MUST** have a minimum of 6-8 hours of full (not filtered) sun.

This alone will guarantee ripe tomatoes most seasons. Many Shoreline yards have at least one small sunny spot. Seek it, and put your plant there. My backyard is dominated by the neighbor's 100-ft Douglas firs. There's a tiny sunny patch (about 4 sq ft) against a wall on my patio where I usually put a pot of cosmos or petunias. Last year I put a large (24" deep) pot in that precise location with 3 kinds of cherry tomatoes and a very tall tomato cage. We ate tomatoes off the vine until first frost. The combination of the sunny spot, reflective heat from the south facing wall and the stored heat in the concrete kept them warm enough to continue producing. There is one variety, **Stupice**, developed for short-season climates, which does produce in filtered sun, part shade conditions. You will get ripe tomatoes, but typically fewer tomatoes than one grown in full-on sun.

2) Watch the nighttime temperatures

The best tomatoes come to those who wait for nighttime temperatures to stay consistently at 50 degrees. Until it gets warm enough, simply put your tomato plants outside in the morning, and take them in at night. Sure, you can plant them early and cover your tomatoes with a plastic bag or Wall-O-Water® to gain a few days of growing time, but be sure to open the bags, or remove them on days that get above 70 degrees. The plastic bag approach reminds me of potty training. It's much easier on you if you just wait until the little guys are ready. J

3) Don't judge a tomato by its size!

Those two-foot-tall plants with the lush dark green foliage and flower buds are in for the shock of their lives when they get buried in your cold, soggy soil. I grow my own tomatoes from seed by starting them indoors, and transplant them into an unheated cold frame as soon as they get their first true leaves. When ready to plant, they are stout, tough, and short. A few years back, a friend gave me a couple of her leftover tall store-bought tomato plants. I planted them in early May, surrounding them carefully with plastic. Then a couple of weeks later I got around to

getting my little homegrown plants into the ground beside them. Fast forward two weeks – guess which ones were bigger? My short little plants had caught up with the others and looked healthier. They were literally ready to hit the ground running and suffered no transplant shock.

4) Feed well at least once!

Tomato roots will grow to a depth of two feet or more. Give them plenty of compost, especially if you are attempting to grow them in pots. In addition to feeding, the compost will help keep the soil consistently moist. I've followed this ritual formula for years: Dig a hole 10 to 12" deep. Place ½ to 1 cup of dried organic fertilizer in the hole and mix in well. Fill the hole with water. When the water drains, add the tomato and bury it deeply. Don't be afraid to bury some of the leaves, especially if your tomato is a leggy one. Unlike many plants, tomatoes will put out roots all along their buried stems. Side dressing with dry organic fertilizer or drinks of fish fertilizer or compost tea during the growing season are encouraged, but honestly, there are some busy summers when I just don't get around to it. I still get lots of tomatoes because the time-release fertilizer is in a place where it is needed most, under the roots.

5) Spacing

This varies by variety. No less than 18" and up to 24" seems to work well. Planting closely encourages disease travel in the case of late blight, but planting closely also gives you more cover and the likelihood that more tomatoes will ripen. Pollination is also improved when tomatoes are planted closer together and you may be able to get away with less staking and tying late in the season.

6) Stake the plant when you plant

Resist procrastination. It is much easier to do it now than later. If your tomato is a "determinate" variety, staking may not be required. If it is an "indeterminate" variety, be prepared to put up a fortress. Some varieties can grow to 5-6 feet in a good season. Most tomato cages prove inadequate. Large stakes pounded deeply into the ground are much easier on the budget. Tomato stems are tender. Invest in a pair of panty hose, and cut each leg into bands, 1-2" wide. Split each band to make a nice stretchy tie. As tomatoes grow, tie them to the stake.

7) CONSISTENT watering assures success

Most tomato problems and disease can be traced to inconsistent watering. Set up a routine. Water deeply once a week; more in very hot weather conditions. Don't just sprinkle the topsoil. That water quickly evaporates, never reaching the roots of the plant. Mulching around the base can help with evaporation on those very hot days. Water in the morning whenever possible. If you must water at night, do it as early as you can, and be sure to keep the leaves dry. Don't do a light watering sometimes, and heavy watering other times. Check your water routine by troweling into the soil (don't disturb roots) after you've watered to see how far down the water went. If it didn't get to the roots, water more. Keep track of the time, and then water

8) To denude or not?

Tomato growers have varied opinions as to how many leaves to remove. Tomatoes ripen in the dark, so leaf growth is beneficial. Diseases and bugs travel quickly up heavily leafed plants. A good rule of thumb is to remove just enough male (not-fruiting stems and leaves) to improve air

circulation, especially at the base, but leave top leaves on to protect fruit from sun-scald (ha!) and aid ripening. Try it both ways and see what works best for you. A lot depends on how close together the tomatoes have been planted.

9) What about disease?

Tomatoes have amazingly few problems. Inconsistent growing conditions most often related to poor watering technique, created stress conditions. Stressed plants are ripe for attack from pests and diseases. Learn to recognize the big three:

Blossom End Rot is related to too-much-too-little watering syndrome and can be corrected. Pick tomatoes, cut off the blossom end and eat them. Improve your watering technique.

Gray Leaf Spot or moldy gray spots on leaves is caused by wet leaves at night from rain or watering during successive cool night conditions. This condition can be improved by removing lower non-fruiting leaves and stems to improve air circulation. Don't water the leaves.

The dreaded **Late Blight**, again related to a cooler-than-normal growing season, causes plant stems and leaves to turn dark gray and greasy looking, seemingly overnight. If this happens, pull any affected plants right away as it spreads quickly. Send these plants to the landfill, not your compost pile. I can recall only one season in the last 20 or so, where this occurred in my garden. However, my brother, who lives in the foothills east of Monroe where nights often get quite cool early, has given up trying to grow tomatoes because late blight is a constant battle in his microclimate.

10) Bugs

There are relatively few to worry about. Early in the season, if your garden is plagued with flea beetles, the lower leaves may get riddled with tiny holes. Simply pick them off. Fleas beetles don't jump very high. Occasionally, you might find a tomato horn worm eating a hole in a tomato. Don't worry about horn worm ID. Any fat unidentifiable worm on your tomato should get the Cisco Morris squish treatment. Slugs and snails will often treat themselves to a tomato resting on the ground. Stake your tomatoes well and support heavy stems to avoid contact with soil. After your first season or two of success, you may want to try your hand at starting your own plants from seed, which is surprisingly easy. We hope to have an article on that too, early next year, and a propagating class, too. Check back here for a new article on gardening in Shoreline every month. You may also access archived articles [here](#).

In the meantime, here's hoping for a great tomato year!

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