



Harvest of the Month

Tomatoes



Social Sciences

Tomatoes originated in the Andes region of western South America, where they grew wild. Indigenous peoples cultivated them, eventually spreading the plant northward through Central America and into Mexico. The Aztecs in Mexico are known for their significant role in tomato domestication, cultivating larger, sweeter varieties and even using the Aztec word "tomatl" as the origin of the name "tomato". Early Spanish explorers of Central and South America took tomatoes back to Europe in the 16th Century. It took a long time for the tomato to be accepted there as a safe and wholesome food, first becoming popular in Italy. Tomatoes eventually gained acceptance and popularity across Europe and Asia, becoming a staple in many cuisines. They are now a widely cultivated and consumed food worldwide, with billions of tons grown annually. China is the top producer of tomatoes in the world. California is the top tomato producing state, growing 95% of the United States' processing tomatoes.

Tomate means tomato in Spanish.

Botany

Tomatoes are part of the plant family Solanaceae, commonly known as the Nightshade family. The nightshade family is known for containing alkaloids, which do have toxic properties. Some plants in the family are quite toxic, such as tobacco or belladonna; but there are also many important food crops besides tomatoes, such as peppers, potatoes and eggplant.



Growth Habits



Indeterminate/Vine/Cordon – These are the vining varieties that will need vertical support to grow upward. The fruit on these tomatoes will ripen continuously throughout the season (usually over ~ 3 months).

Determinate/Bush – These plants' growth habit is more bush than a vine, although they can still benefit from some support. The fruit on these tomatoes ripen relatively at the same time (within a 1-3 week time period), so often are used for paste when you need a lot of tomatoes all at once.



Use Classification

Slicer – These are the tomatoes that you eat, apple-style, right in the garden warmed from the summer sun. They are best for slicing for sandwiches and burgers, or chopping into a salad. They tend to be juicier than paste tomatoes, and are therefore much better for fresh eating. Most slicer tomatoes tend to have indeterminate growth.

Paste – In general, these tomatoes are “fleshier” than slicers, with less juice and thicker walls. They can be used to make tomato sauce, fresh salsas, ketchup, tomato juice, or can also be dried. Paste tomatoes usually have determinate growth, making it easy to harvest for sauce and can all at once.

Cherry – These tomatoes are smaller and more prolific, and excellent for eating raw in salads, or just popped into your mouth as a snack. Cherry tomatoes usually have indeterminate growth.

Nutrition

Tomatoes are a good source of Vitamin C, K and A. They also contain many antioxidants, the most well-known being lycopene, which has been shown to support heart health.

Cooking tomatoes makes these antioxidants more accessible to the body, enhancing their health benefits.

Growing Tips

The tomato is one of the most popular garden vegetable crops. It is popular because it is easy to grow, very productive and because garden grown tomatoes are generally much superior to commercially grown tomatoes. As long as you wait until after the nights are staying at near 50 degrees to plant, you should be able to grow tomatoes almost anywhere. There are even varieties that can be grown in containers.

Care & Maintenance

Make sure your tomatoes have a sturdy string or support cage when planting, depending on if they will grow as a vine or bush. Plant deeply so they have a sturdy foundation and access to water later in the Summer. Tomato plants need less frequent, deep waterings. If you plant them at least a foot deep, you can stop watering once they start blooming to get a sweater, more sugar-dense fruit. Make sure to prune regularly, depending on the growth habit, and fertilize with comfrey, horsetail, or vermicompost tea every 2-3 weeks, beginning when you start to see fruits forming.

Harvesting

Tomatoes are ready to harvest as soon as they are fully colored, even if they are still a little bit firm. They will continue to ripen off the plant.

Fun Fact

Tomatoes are botanically a fruit but are most commonly placed in the vegetable food group because they are used in savory dishes. They are even legally a vegetable, having been ruled as such by the Supreme Court in 1893 as part of a case on taxes. In some schools, pizza is considered a vegetable serving because of this ruling!

