

# TEXAS HIGHWAYS--TOMATO--HOW-TO SIDEBAR

## GROW YOUR OWN AT HOME

Undoubtedly, homegrown tomatoes offer the freshest flavor. And, with proper planning, growing your own can be easy and fun. Your local county agricultural extension office offer all the “how to” details (or check Texas A&M’s website: <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/plantanswers/tomato.html>). But here are a few tips to whet your “homegrown” appetite.

### **Picking the Right Varieties**

Tomatoes love sunshine (8 to 10 hours a day) but suffer in the heat. Daytime temperatures above 90 degrees stifle new tomato “fruit set,” although existing fruit continue to ripen. That means Texas has a relatively specific tomato-growing season (actually two short seasons, spring and fall). Late-maturing varieties that produce contest winners up North are tricky to grow in Texas, says Travis County extension agent Robert “Skip” Richter.

Gardening guru Jerry Parsons preaches a surefire plan for success. First, choose a variety named SureFire, says the horticultural specialist at the Texas Agricultural Extension Service in San Antonio, where he tests all tomato varieties recommended by the agency. SureFire matures quickly and produces tennis ball-sized fruit. But don’t put all your tomatoes in one basket. Parsons suggests also planting a larger variety (baseball-sized) such as Celebrity, perhaps the easiest of all tomatoes to grow. Other recommended varieties include Carnival, Bingo, Heatwave, and Sunmaster. For salads, try a cherry tomato like Cherry Large (up to golf ball size).

### **Planting and Growing**

Plant fall tomatoes in late July (with harvest from October until the first frost), advises William D. Adams, horticulturalist at the Harris County extension service, which offers gardeners an educational program called “Team Tomato” (281/855-5600).

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Start spring tomatoes as early as possible (a week or two after the average last frost date) for harvest in May and June.

Most gardeners buy seedlings from local garden centers to plant. To grow your own seedlings, plant seeds indoors 6 to 8 weeks before transplanting outdoors. Select healthy transplants 6 to 10 inches tall, with dark green leaves lacking spots or holes. Avoid tall, spindly plants. Well-tended plants can yield 20 pounds or more of tomatoes each.

Tomatoes thrive in well-drained, loamy soil--evenly moist, but not waterlogged. Before planting, work the soil into a raised mound or bed for each plant, incorporating 2 to 4 inches of organic matter and 2 to 4 pounds of complete (19-5-9), slow-release fertilizer per 100 square feet of bed. Space plants 2 to 3 feet apart and surround each with a wire cage for support, which keeps leaves and tomatoes off the ground, deterring disease and simplifying harvest.

In lieu of adequate rainfall, give plants an inch of water per week, and keep a three-inch layer of organic mulch underneath them to conserve water. Fertilize the plants when fruit first appears (then again every two weeks or so) with 1 to 2 tablespoonfuls of complete fertilizer per plant. Spray for insects or fungus only when necessary.

Once harvested, store ripe tomatoes at room temperature; longterm refrigeration destroys flavor and texture. Mature green tomatoes left over at season's end will ripen if put in a brown paper bag and kept in a dark place for 3 to 4 days. If you end up with too many tomatoes to eat fresh, try canning or freezing them for later use in cooking.

--Randy Mallory

### SOURCES:

--Jerry Parsons, Texas Agricultural Extension Service in San Antonio

--Robert "Skip" Richter, Travis County extension agent

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--Bill Adams, Harris Co. ext. agent

--<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/plantanswers/vegetables/tomato.html>