



Spencer Horticultural Solutions

Homegrown Horticulture

TIPS FOR SUCCESS IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

Growing Great Tomatoes

Tomatoes are one of the holy grail of garden vegetables. Everyone wants to grow a great tomato. Let's face it; everyone wants to grow LOTS of great tomatoes! And it is possible to grow tomatoes in our climate, although there are times when it can be a frustrating and fruitless (no pun intended) endeavor.

I've grown a lot of tomatoes. I love to eat them and to process them into delicious salsa and sauces. But, I'll be honest, tomatoes can be infuriating plants to grow. For fruit producing plants, they seem to be completely reluctant to actually finish growing and ripen. But, here are some tips that might improve things, or at least, help you to avoid a whole lot of nothing at the end of the summer.

First of, understand the different qualities of the different tomatoes that you might grow. You can't expect a patio tomato to suddenly defy its genetics and grow you a big, meaty, sandwich-filling beefsteak tomato. A beefsteak tomato is going to be pretty juicy and watery, while a roma is going to be meaty and less juicy (perfect for sauces).

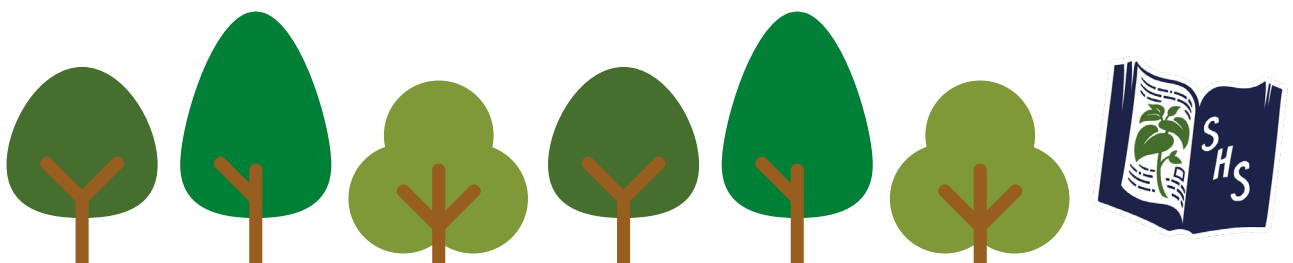
Typically, tomatoes that have smaller fruit are going to produce lots of flowers and fruit. They will likely ripen sooner, but with a more spread out harvest.

You can't get tomatoes to mature from plants that are started from seed in the garden, at least not in the cooler parts of Canada. You have to start from seed indoors, then move the 6-8 week old transplants outside when the risk of frost is past, probably at the end of May (at the earliest) or early June. Then, anything you can do to keep the heat up around them should help to accelerate their growth.

I might be getting ahead of myself, but maybe it is best to come to a level of acceptance early on. Tomatoes are going to mess with you. They will NEVER (probably) fully ripen every fruit that they set on the plant. You could remove most of the flowers to force them to channel their energy towards a few fruit, and all that they'll do is set more flowers. I have a 6 month research project from 1998 to support this fact, if you want to lose an hour to talk about it. Just accept that you won't get everything from the plants, and you'll be happier, or at least less unhappy. Rant over.

Plant your tomatoes deep. I like to put them with the root ball about 2-3 inches below the soil surface. This has several purposes. One, it adds stability to the plant. They will develop what are called adventitious roots from the stems, which add stability and structure. I'm not 100% sure that they do more than that, but it isn't a bad thing.

Two, it means that the root ball isn't going to end up drying out because it is exposed to the air. I also like to occasionally plant my tomatoes on a slight angle (think, leaning tower of Pisa, angle). Same sort of purpose. As an exception to this, if you have a small transplant, or it is a short statured one that doesn't have much stem length, maybe just make sure the root ball is covered.



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If you can cover your tomatoes, with a wall-o-water, or a mini-greenhouse, or some other thing that will trap heat and light, they will grow faster. Eventually, you will need to remove the covers to let the pollinators in, but early on, it will give your plants a boost.

It is important to support your tomatoes, at least the large, heavy-fruited ones, or the ones with a heavy fruit load. Use cages, or some other support, but get them up and open. It'll prevent you missing fruit underneath, keep the leaves off of the ground, and should open up the plant to more light.

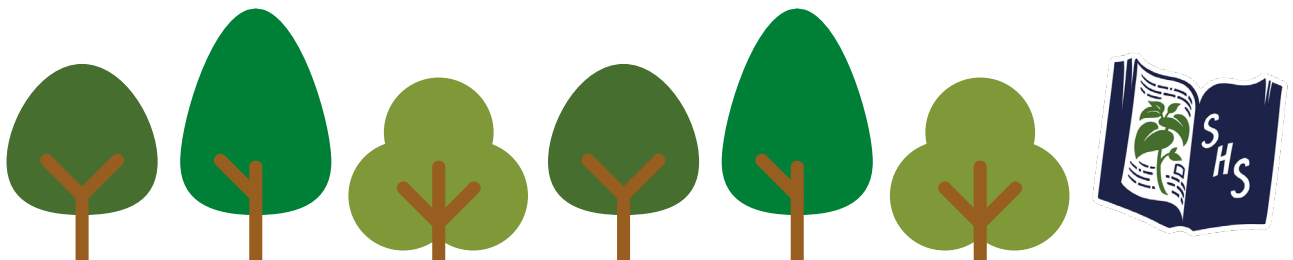
You should probably give the tomatoes a haircut or pinch the growing points periodically. This is done to stop their ongoing and persistent upward and outward expansion. It forces them to look to their developing fruit. I'm not great at remembering to do this, but once you've got some decent flowering and fruit set, start nipping off the outer ends of the branches. You could use secateurs or scissors or a sharp knife, or you could be like me and just break off 4-6 inch sections of the ends of the branches.

When it comes to fertilizing tomatoes, you don't want to go crazy. Give them a shot of fertilizer in the water at transplanting, then maybe give them a bit of a low analysis fertilizer (something like a 2-3-1, or a 10-10-10) every now and then. Avoid fertilizers that have high nitrogen (first number), as you don't want the plants to be all plant and no fruit. If you have a fairly rich soil, you probably won't need to fertilize much.

Keep the water levels uniform during the season. Wet then dry, then wet then dry, repeated, can lead to issues. They don't need to be soaked all the time, but you don't want things bone dry all the time. You'll find you have more Blossom End Rot when you have uneven watering. Also, wet/dry cycles also lead to fruit cracking and other deformities.

Other things to avoid are applying any sort of lawn weed killer in the vicinity of your tomatoes (and potatoes). They are extremely sensitive to the volatile gases, and will get twisted and deformed growth easily. Also, be careful about where you get compost and stuff, as it can have residues that will affect tomatoes, but not other garden plants.

Give tomatoes a try. It is worth the journey (and associated effort).



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