

# Tomato Harvest

## Ten Tips for Growing Top Tomatoes



Urban Harvest  
Gardening for good.

All you need is a few essential steps to have a successful tomato harvest year after year.

### 1. Provide Good Drainage

Tomatoes do not like to get their feet wet, and they cannot tolerate our heavy clay soils. Grow your plants in raised beds at least 8 inches high, filled with high quality well-draining soil with lots of organic matter. If you're building a brand new bed, it takes time to establish top quality soil and you will have better success in subsequent years.

### 2. Plant at the Right Time

Tomato plants cannot tolerate our summer heat, but they grow "great" in both the spring and the fall, and during a mild winter you could harvest tomatoes in January! The transplanting windows are:

**Spring — February 1 to March 15**

**Fall — July 21 to August 30**

Planting during these dates allows the mature plant to blossom in April and October, when temperatures are perfect for tomato production. Don't rush out February 1st to plant though, unless you live in the warmest parts of our metro area. Gardeners in Galveston, for example, will want to plant earlier in the spring and later in the fall, and vice-versa if you live north of 1960. *(For more details, the Urban Harvest planting calendar includes a detailed planting dates by geographic location.)*

### 3. Plant Large Transplants

Small "6-pack" transplants can get eaten by pests or die in the February cold or August heat. Purchase 6-inch or 12-inch pots with transplants. If you start from seeds indoors under growlights or buy small transplants, start early, transfer them into larger pots, grow them bigger and get them in the ground during your planting window. It can be very challenging to grow tomatoes from seed directly in the ground in Houston; we don't recommend it.

### 4. Fertilize Organically

When you plant your transplants, work in a cup of high quality organic fertilizer in and around the hole. Good fertilizers include Microlife, Soil Food, and Earth Essentials, which are typically found at the smaller garden shops. Or, keep a compost bin in your yard and you'll generate your own free organic fertilizer and reduce food waste in the landfill.

### 5. Shelter from the Weather

Spring tomatoes do best if kept warm until night temperatures are over 55°. Wall O Water is a handy product, but frost cloth wrapped around the cages with a gallon jug of water next to the plant works well, too. In the fall, new plants appreciate partial shade from the sun for a few weeks until they grow good roots. Wall O Water can save fall tomatoes from a December freeze and extend your harvest.

### 6. Give Tomatoes Support

Unsupported tomato plants droop with heavy fruit and touch the ground, where they are more likely to rot and be eaten by critters. Support your plant with tomato cages — five-foot high reinforcing fencing (remesh) is a good choice for affordable cages. Cut it into seven-foot lengths and roll it to make cages two feet in diameter. Stake them well and tie the cage to the stakes, or your growing plant may tip them over. If you have the budget, top quality galvanized cages can be found online or in specialty stores. Purchase five- or even seven-foot tall cages, rather than the three-foot tall "pepper" cages often sold at garden shops.

### 7. Attract Bugs to Deal With Your Insect Problems

Create the right environment to attract bugs that attack common tomato plant pests. If a bed in your garden includes flowering cilantro, dill, fennel, mint, native flowers and/or buckwheat, you will have a home for these bugs. Providing a water source, such as a bird-bath or pond, is helpful too.

*Attract Bugs to Deal With Your Insect Problems, continued*

One pest that causes headaches with tomato gardeners is the leaf-footed stinkbug. It causes blemishes on tomatoes so that parts don't ripen, affecting its flavor. The best way to control them is to catch them and kill everyone you find; systematic hunting quickly reduces them to a rare species. You can step on them, put them in soapy water, vacuum up herds of tiny red offspring with a dust buster, or squash them with your fingers if you have to!

It is important to correctly identify the leaf-footed stinkbug. In our area, young leaf-foots are red ant-like, ant-sized insects found in clusters on a fruit or vegetable. Young adults are red with darker colors, often found alone, and are perhaps fingernail length. Adults are all brown and have upper rear legs that are wide and flat like a leaf. They will be seen on or near a vegetable or fruit.

Young leaf-foots are the same color as the beneficial pest-eating hunter insect, the assassin bug. These are also ant-like in appearance, but have sleeker bodies than the leaf-foot, are never seen in groups, and most particularly, do not have wide, flat upper rear legs. Assassin bugs are killing your pests for you. In sum, do not kill solitary ones unless they have thickened hind legs.

### **8. Satisfy a Bird's Thirst**

Birds eat an enormous number of insects and continually provide free "fertilizer" for the garden, but some of them – especially the mockingbird – will make a feast of your tomatoes. Birds sometimes attack tomatoes because they are thirsty; give them fresh clean water in a shallow birdbath safe from predators and they will prefer it to occasional sips of tomato juice.

### **9. Prevent Tomato Diseases**

Septoria leaf spot, early blight (alternaria), fusarium wilt, blossom end rot, cracking, anthracnose, and other tomato diseases are common in our area because of the hot humid conditions. An organic garden with healthy soil provides a natural defense against these ills. In addition to using organic fertilizer when you plant, topping off the soil with several inches of a composted native mulch (look for mixed species on the label) feeds the soil, which in turn provides energy for microbes that eat these diseases. If you choose to spray tomato plants with chemical fungicides, you kill

a wide variety of harmless and beneficial microbes, which will in turn weaken your plants' and your soil's natural defenses, and create a "chemical dependency" in your garden.

### **10. Enjoy the Peak of Flavor**

Store your picked tomatoes at room temperature. Refrigeration breaks down 23 different types of delicate flavor molecules that you have worked so hard to grow. Slice just before eating and enjoy the fruits of your labor!

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Urban Harvest is a Houston-based, non-profit organization supporting a network of urban gardens, farms and orchards that inspire and empower people of diverse backgrounds to grow food in our city.

Our programs include:

- Youth Education: Afterschool programs or during school enrichment at area schools.
- Community Gardens: Vegetable gardens for donation & community harvests.
- Urban Harvest Farmers Markets: Year-round and seasonal markets since 2004.
- Organic Gardening Classes: A variety of classes on fruit, vegetable and sustainability topics.

### **Get involved with Urban Harvest:**

- Take a class — class listings are on our website.
- Volunteer in one of 100+ community gardens.
- Become a donating supporter.
- Start a community or school garden.
- Shop or sell at our Farmers Markets.
- Attend our January Fruit Tree Sale fundraiser.

For more information, visit us online at:

[www.urbanharvest.org](http://www.urbanharvest.org)



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