

Tomatoes: Big & Early

How To Grow The Biggest And First Tomatoes On The Block

OK, so you've figured out how to grow a decent tomato. Now it's time to have some real fun trying to grow the biggest and/or first ripe tomato in the neighborhood.

First you'll have to choose the right varieties, and then you'll need to employ a few tricks and heroic measures. But when you're eating fresh tomatoes on the Fourth of July or toting around fruits the size of volleyballs, you'll know it's worth the effort.

Let's start with growing **BIG** tomatoes, and for that, we'll defer to Gordon Graham of Edmond, Okla., the world record-holder for big tomatoes with a 7 pound, 12-ouncer he grew in 1987.

Growing **BIG** tomatoes

Here's Graham's 10-point plan:

- 1.) Grow the right variety. You'll need a variety with the built-in genetics to get big. Graham's record-breaking tomato was a 'Delicious' variety, but other big-fruited varieties are 'Whopper,' 'Beefsteak,' 'Big Boy,' 'Big Girl,' 'Supersteak' and 'Beefmaster.'
- 2.) Start big. Start seeds inside in February or go with transplants in big pots so your plants are ready to set fruit soon after going in the garden. The more time on the vine, the bigger the fruits can grow, says Graham.
- 3.) Lots of sun. Full all-day sun is best. Eight hours is the bare minimum.
- 4.) Rich soil. Graham adds generous amounts of compost and rotted manure to his soil. Ohio gardener Robert Ehig, who almost beat Graham's record in 1994, amends his soil with lots of peat moss.
- 5.) Lots of room. Normal spacing is 18 to 24 inches. For big fruits, give your plants at least 3 feet in all directions. Four feet is even better.
- 6.) Lots of water. A good deep soaking once a week is essential if rain doesn't do the deed for you. "One or 2 inches a week is supposed to be adequate, but I give them more than that," says Graham. He uses a soaker hose.
- 7.) Lots of fertilizer. Both Graham and Ehig use Miracle-Gro. Ehig adds it once a week during the growing season. Whatever fertilizer you use, make sure it's one that's higher in phosphorus (the middle number on the bag or bottle) than nitrogen (the first number). Overdoing it with nitrogen can lead to overly lush foliage at the expense of good fruit.
- 8.) Good support. You've gotta grow tomatoes up, not let them sprawl on the ground. Sturdy stakes, wire cages or a trellis all work fine. Just set up the system at planting time so you don't ram stakes into the roots later.
- 9.) Prune. Here's the real key. Allow only one main stem to produce fruit. Pinch off all other "suckers" as they form. Suckers are the fruiting stems that pop out where two other stems meet. (See the illustration at right.)

Equally important is selecting only one fruit per plant to be the champion grower. At fruit set, Graham picks off all but three baby tomatoes, and then when those reach the size of a half-dollar, he keeps the biggest and best and gets rid of the other two. You might also

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consider tying a sling to your remaining fruit so the weight of it doesn't cause it to pull off the vine.

10.) Hope for the best. You'll need cooperation from nature from here on out. But one last "secret" Graham offers is to play music for your tomato plants. He believes the sound is a growth stimulant, similar to the way the wind activates plant hormones that encourage stockiness. He plays country music, if you want to know.

Growing early tomatoes

Some of the techniques used in growing big tomatoes also apply to early tomatoes. That would include a sunny site, rich soil, lots of water and fertilizer and good support.

Variety also is extremely important, only in this case, choose the fastest-maturing variety you can find. Look for patio-type tomatoes or early varieties such as 'Early Girl' or 'First Lady.' These types aren't as sweet and big as main-season varieties, but what you give up in those areas you gain in earliness.

Another option is to go with a cherry tomato variety, such as 'Sweet 100,' 'Sweet Million' or 'Sweet Chelsea.' These put out mature fruit early because they don't have as much growing to do to reach their full size, and they're generally better-tasting than the bigger, early-maturing varieties.

You're also probably going to have to start your own plants from seed since tomatoes generally aren't available as transplants when you're going to need them. Start your seeds inside in mid- to late January.

Since tomatoes don't like the cold and won't grow when soil temperatures are below 50 degrees, you'll need to warm the garden soil in order to get off to an early start. Along about mid- to late March, cover the tomato bed with a sheet of clear plastic or else place a coldframe, cloche or mini-greenhouse over the bed. The idea is to trap the heat from the sun to warm the soil.

On or about April 1 (no fooling), plant your tomato seedlings. Immediately surround each one with a Wall-O-Water plant protector. These are plastic devices with water-filled cylinders that act as mini-greenhouses. They'll look like little teepees around your plants when you're done. Hardening off your transplants for a few days before planting is helpful, but it's not critical since the transplants will remain shielded in a greenhouse-like environment in the garden.

Another option is to build your own plastic- or glass-covered mini-greenhouses and place water-filled plastic jugs inside to absorb heat.

Although you're starting your tomatoes outside about six weeks earlier than normal, don't expect to get fruit six weeks earlier. Remember, the weather and soil are still cold enough that growth is greatly slowed. But if you combine the early start with the early variety, it's entirely possible to have ripe fruit by early July.

One other way to encourage earlier fruiting is to pinch off all suckers as soon as they form. This encourages the plant to put all its energy into ripening the fruit on the main stem. This will obviously decrease yield, but if your aim is earliness, so what? By mid-summer, you'll be harvesting tons from your main crop anyway.