

I can well remember when working as a young apprentice gardener in the early 1960s 'seed sowing during the month of January.' As well starting off millions of bedding plants it was also time to get the tomato seed under way.

Tomatoes take on average 22 weeks from seed sowing to fruiting. Quite a long time, so that's why it is necessary to get the seed off to an early start. Of course this normally means growing in a heated greenhouse using horticultural lights of some sort, rather a costly business in order to pick your own tomatoes from late May.

For the average gardener it is better to begin seed sowing in mid March and plant out into a cold greenhouse in mid May or when all danger of frost has past. Then by late July you should be picking ripe fruit and this can continue right up to Christmas, 'depending on which varieties of tomato you grow.' For a long cropping season choose an indeterminate type. These need to be



grown up canes and loosely tied in at regular intervals. They also need all their side shoots pinched out, 'these occur at each leaf joint' (as shown by the red arrow). The side shoots can be used as cuttings.

You can also grow the plants up strings, it is just a matter of attaching a string to the roof of the greenhouse and then tie it loosely around the base of the tomato plant. As the plant grows wind it round the string. This was a method we often used in the professional tomato houses.

Determinate tomatoes crop profusely over a shorter period of time. These are the bush types and are often used in hanging baskets or grown in large pots on the patio. The fruit is generally smaller and highly regarded for its sweetness. A bonus of this type of tomato is that you don't pinch out the side shoots. Ideal for the busy gardener.

Sowing the seed

Prepare a seed tray using a good seed compost. My preference is for the professional grade Levington F2S.



Space the seed a couple of inches apart. Dibble shallow holes and pop one seed in each hole. If you are using an F1 variety you can realistically expect 100% germination.

Stand the seed tray in warm water until you see moisture appear at the surface of the compost. Allow to drain then pop into a plastic bag and then into a propagator 'if you have one'. Failing this a warm kitchen is quite adequate and germination of seed will take about a week. Don't forget the label and also record sowing and germination dates in a garden diary - you will be surprised at how useful this information will become in subsequent years. As soon as the seed germinates remove the plastic bag and place the tray on a window sill or in any position that provides good light.

(An alternative to growing your own is to go to an NVS plant sale. There you will be able to obtain top class plants from a wide range of varieties. Look out for advertised sales on the NVS website).

As soon as the plants start to form their first pair of true leaves (The very first pair of leaves that you see upon germination are the seed leaves, not true leaves, the 2nd pair of leaves are the true ones) you can pot them on into 3" pots using Levington M2. At this stage I like to sweeten the compost with a handful of ground or Dolomite limestone added to a 2 gallon bucket of compost. This helps to raise the pH of the compost and provides extra magnesium. I also add a couple of handfuls of vermiculite to aid drainage and help retain moisture.

There are numerous ways in which to grow your tomatoes. This is the ring culture method. A bottomless pot is stood on good deep grow bags. Cut out the plastic from the bag to the dimension of the pot. The pot can then be pushed down into the compost for an inch or so. Give each bag 2 gallons of warm water. Then fill the pots with Levington M3 compost. Once again add some lime and vermiculite.



I usually plant out in the cold greenhouse during the first week of May, when I



can maintain an overnight temperature of 40f. (Adjust this timing to your own area).

I stand the compost in the greenhouse for a few days prior to potting up, just to get it up to the ambient temperature of the greenhouse.

Don't over crowd your grow bags. I only ever use two tomatoes to a bag.

At this stage of their development keep the compost evenly moist. Once a week give the plants a feed with a high nitrogen soluble fertiliser. Vitax 301



or Chempak No 2 are good ones. If the pots look dry at all, give them a watering and wait an hour or so before giving the feed. About a pint per plant will do.

Keep feeding with high nitrogen until the first truss of tomatoes is set. Then it is time to switch to a high potash feed. Tomorite is fine. Be careful not to overfeed or you may lock up the plants ability to access other nutrients. To counter this give the plants a supplement feed of calcium nitrate. 'Available from Chempak'.

Time to start feeding with potash.



Indeterminate tomatoes will give you 5 or 6 good trusses of tomatoes up to roof height. When the plant touches the glass pinch out the growing point. This will help to initiate fruit set. Another thing I do in the early season is to drape an old banana skin

over a leaf close to a truss of tomatoes to help them ripen. Apparently the ethylene gas triggers the ripening process.

During the growing season I take cuttings, utilising the unwanted side shoots. These are great for keeping up with tomato production. As soon as one lot of tomatoes is nearing the end, I have cuttings already potted up to take their place.

A great thing about taking cuttings is that they will set their first truss very low to the ground. Thus maximising the amount of tomatoes you can grow.

All you need to do is select a cutting from a side shoot, trim it to about 4" long remove any excessive foliage and pop it into a jar of clean water. It is very



important that you change the water every three days or else your cuttings will turn to mush.

Once roots appear, pot the cuttings up into 3" pots in Levingtons F2S compost.

And there you have it, a continuous supply of tomato plants true to the parent plant for as long as you wish to take cuttings.



Once the tomatoes have set the first truss, remove all the leaves up to that truss. This allows all the nutrients to be directed to those tomatoes and not feed the unnecessary leaves below. It also serves the purpose of allowing light and air to the

ripening tomatoes and removes potentially diseased foliage. 'A very good practice to get into'.

One last tip - do not spray your tomatoes with water once fruit is set. Droplets can settle on the fruits and allow them to be infected with botrytis (often described as ghost spot).

And one very last tip, blossom end rot is often put down to irregular watering, though it is more likely to be caused by irregularities in temperature within the greenhouse.

And one very last comment, 'It's not the winning, it's the taking part'.

John Trim

