

Tomatoes 101

Deciding which tomato cultivars to purchase may seem a daunting task when walking into a nursery center with dozens of different types of tomatoes. Let's break the selection process down into three factors to consider.

- **Local Climate and Length of Growing Season.**
 - a. Look at the 'days to maturity' listed on the plant tag. This will be an indication of when fruit is expected to ripen.
 - b. Since our growing season is shorter here in southeast Michigan, 'early varieties' are more suited to our climate. For example, 'Early Girl' produces mature fruits in about 59 days.
- **Are tomatoes being grown for eating or cooking?**
 - a. Cherry and grape tomatoes are great for snacking and in salads.
 - b. Roma, sauce and paste varieties are excellent for cooking because they have more flesh and therefore yield more sauce, juice, etc.
 - c. Beefsteak varieties are preferred for slicing.
- **Determinate vs Indeterminate**
 - a. Determinate, or 'bush' tomatoes grow to 2 ½ to 4 feet tall and then stop growing. They mature all of their fruits in a short period of time, usually 1 week to 10 days. This makes determinate tomatoes the preferred choice for making sauces or juices. These are also better suited to container growing.
 - b. Indeterminate tomatoes keep growing throughout the season, setting fruit all summer and providing a steady crop. They can reach 5-6 feet in height and require staking.
 - c. Tumbling tomatoes are best suited for hanging baskets.

Tomato plants need full sun (at least 6 hours per day) and evenly moist well composted soils. It is also recommended to use vegetable fertilizer applied at intervals throughout the growing season. Always follow label instructions. Note spacing requirements, usually indicated on plant tags.

Pruning Tomatoes

It is important to prune tomatoes. Here's why.

- **Prune to reduce diseases.** Tomatoes are prone to a number of diseases especially when the weather becomes humid. Pruning improves airflow within and around the plant and allows the foliage to dry out after rain or watering.
- **Pruning allows more sunlight to reach into the plant,** improving photosynthesis. This makes the plant healthier and also allows the fruit to ripen better.
- **Larger fruit production.** Removing some of the foliage encourages the plant to put more energy into the actual fruit production.
- **Preventing plant injury.** Branches can break from the weight of too much foliage and are more likely to experience wind damage.
- **Aesthetics.** Staked and correctly pruned tomato plants are more attractive than those sprawling all over the ground. Harvesting is also easier when plants are trained.
- **Ease in staking.** It is easier to stake/support one or two main stems than a tangle of vines.
- Remove damaged or diseased foliage. Remove broken branches and discolored leaves.

How to Prune Tomato Plants

Pruning tomato plants is influenced by the type of plant, determinate or indeterminate.

- **Remove suckers.** Suckers typically sprout in joints between the stem and the branches. These divert energy from the main stem and primary branches. They even grow their own leaves, flowers, fruit and even more suckers leading to a more unattractive and out of control plant.
 - Remove most or all suckers of indeterminate varieties.
 - Remove suckers of determinates only *below* the first flower cluster.
 - Remove suckers when they are small, 3 inches long or less, to prevent plant stress. This may require weekly pruning.
 - Some gardeners opt to leave one or two suckers to develop a 2-3 main-stemmed plant.



Suckers pruned out – before and after

- **Remove lower branches.** Cut off or stake up any branches that touch the soil to prevent viral, fungal or bacterial diseases.
- **Toward the end of the growing season,** usually around Labor Day, top prune tomato plants. This stops the plant from continuing to grow taller and encourages the plant to put more energy into ripening the existing fruits. At this point in time, any new flowers will not have time to produce fruit and ripen before the inevitable first frost.

Disclaimer alert! Don't over prune. Removing too many leaves can expose the fruits to too much sun and scald the skin. Like pruning on all plants, never remove more than 1/3 of the foliage.

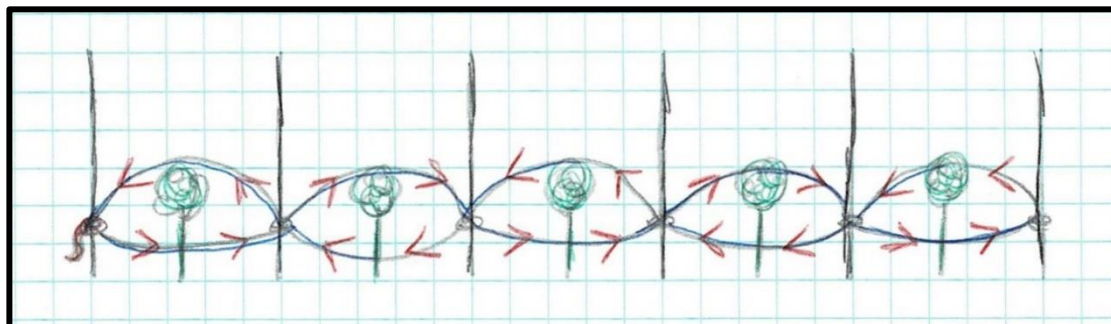
Staking Tomatoes

Indeterminate varieties will require staking. There are a plethora of staking options, from the single stake method, to round tomato cages to woven fences. For this first year of the Victory Garden, we will select indeterminate cherry or grape varieties and implement the Florida Weave Method.

The Florida Weave staking method

- Plant tomatoes in a straight line 2-3 feet apart.
- Hammer tall stakes into the ground between each plant and on each end.
- When the plants reach 9-12 inches in height, begin the weaving process.
 - Tie a string 6 inches above the ground to the first stake at one end.
 - Pull the string in a loop around the second stake, weaving in front of the first plant, loop the twine around the third stake, weave the string behind the second plant.
 - Continue weaving down the entire row, keeping the string taut, and looping the string around the last stake.
 - Return down the line in the other direction, using the same weaving method, but alternating the loops in front and behind the plants.
 - Tie off the string at the first stake. As the plants grow taller, repeat the process, for about every foot of growth.

The Florida Weave Staking Method



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