

TOMATOES

A Sprout-to-Supper Guide



Jordan Mitchell & Stacy Farrell

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Sample

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

| | |
|--|---|
| A Note About Heirloom vs. Hybrid | 2 |
|--|---|

START

| | |
|---|----|
| Choose Your Seeds..... | 6 |
| Determinate Tomatoes..... | 6 |
| Indeterminate Tomatoes | 7 |
| Start Your Seeds..... | 9 |
| How to Start Seeds Indoors..... | 9 |
| How to Winter Sow Seeds..... | 11 |
| Preparing to Transplant to the Garden | 11 |

PLANT

| | |
|--|----|
| Amend Your Soil..... | 14 |
| Soil pH and Tomatoes | 14 |
| Nutrient Requirements and Amendments | 15 |
| How I Amend | 17 |
| When & How to Plant | 19 |
| Spacing | 20 |
| Planting Depth | 22 |

GROW

| | |
|------------------|----|
| Maintaining..... | 26 |
| Watering | 26 |
| Fertilizing..... | 28 |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| When & How to Fertilize | 30 |
| Prevent & Protect | 34 |
| Pests | 34 |
| How to Hand Pollinate Tomatoes | 43 |
| Diseases | 45 |

HARVEST

| | |
|---|----|
| Recognizing Ripeness | 52 |
| The Inside-Out Ripening Process | 52 |
| Signs That Tomatoes Are Ready to Harvest..... | 53 |

PRESERVE

| | |
|---|----|
| Freezing..... | 56 |
| Advantages..... | 56 |
| Disadvantages | 56 |
| Using Your Freezer As a Holding Place for Tomatoes..... | 57 |
| How to Freeze Tomatoes | 58 |
| Freezing Diced Tomatoes..... | 58 |
| Dehydrating | 61 |
| Using a Dehydrator | 61 |
| Using an Oven..... | 62 |
| Sun Drying Tomatoes | 63 |
| Turning Dried Tomatoes into Tomato Powder | 64 |
| Canning..... | 66 |
| Water Bath Canning..... | 67 |
| Pressure Canning | 67 |

| | |
|--|----|
| How to Prepare Tomatoes for Canning Sauce..... | 68 |
| Four Ways to Prepare Tomatoes..... | 69 |

SERVE

| | |
|---|----|
| Tomato Powder..... | 75 |
| 1. Tomato Paste..... | 75 |
| 2. Tomato Sauce..... | 76 |
| 3. Tomato Juice..... | 76 |
| 4. BBQ Sauce..... | 77 |
| 5. Tomato Bouillon and Popcorn Seasoning..... | 77 |
| 6. Ketchup..... | 78 |

VIDEOS

| | |
|---|----|
| When to Pick Tomatoes..... | 80 |
| How to Make Tomato Powder (A Dehydrating Tutorial)..... | 80 |
| Ways to Use Tomato Powder..... | 80 |
| Canning Spaghetti Sauce..... | 80 |
| Canning Green Tomatoes..... | 81 |

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

| | |
|------------------------|----|
| About the Authors..... | 82 |
|------------------------|----|

INTRODUCTION

What You Should Know Before You Start

[Jordan speaking] For years, growing tomatoes was my garden nemesis. In fact, I've been so bad at it in the past that I debated whether or not I should even write this guide.

But I finally grew enough tomatoes to can all of our pasta sauce and salsa needs for the year. We even had some left over to freeze dry for fresh snacking—and, of course, we ate plenty of fresh “mater” sandwiches.

So why would I write a tomato guide? Because of the struggles.

All the trials and failures I've faced have forced me to dig into books, pore over tutorials, test relentlessly, and seek wisdom from local farmers.

I now know that there were three primary culprits behind my tomato woes:

- *I didn't grow the right varieties of tomatoes for my area. (A prized northern tomato will crash and burn in the hot south.)*
- *I wasn't fertilizing properly. (Tomatoes have different needs at different times.)*
- *I was waiting WAY too long to harvest. (It's more important than it seems.)*

We cover all of the above and much more throughout this guide.

INTRODUCTION

Growing tomatoes actually isn't hard—you just need to start off right.

A Note About Heirloom vs. Hybrid

No doubt, you are aware that there are hybrid and heirloom varieties of tomato seeds and seedlings.

If your primary goal is to fill your pantry with homegrown tomatoes via food preservation, it is surprisingly important to understand the differences between the two varieties. I have been misinformed in the past and have even fallen for some of the marketing language surrounding this topic, so I want to pass along the clarity I've gained.

Heirloom Tomatoes

Heirloom tomatoes are open-pollinated varieties—i.e. fertilized by natural means—that have been passed down through generations, often prized for their unique flavors, colors, and shapes. They are typically grown from seeds saved from open-pollinated plants, allowing for the preservation of genetic diversity.

Because of this, you can save seeds from this year's tomatoes, plant them next year, and get the exact same tomato you enjoyed this year. It may even be better because its parent was grown in YOUR soil and, therefore, can adapt more easily to your native microorganisms, weather patterns, pest pressures, and other local factors.

Hybrid Tomatoes

Hybrid tomatoes, on the other hand, are the result of crossbreeding two different tomato varieties, typically selected for specific traits such as disease resistance, productivity, or uniformity.

While hybrid tomatoes may not have the same historical significance or diversity as heirlooms, they offer reliable performance and consistency, making them popular choices for commercial growers and home gardeners alike.

TOMATOES: A SEED TO SUPPER GUIDE

Unfortunately, you can't save seed from hybrid tomatoes to plant in the future. While the seeds will grow, they will not produce the exact same parent plant with all of the excellent characteristics they were originally bred for. (They may even be sterile and not produce flowers or fruit at all.)

Which One Do You Pick?

Heirloom tomatoes are looking like the clear winner, right? They are wonderful—no doubt—and I continue to grow them.

That said, heirloom tomatoes simply do not produce as high a volume nor survive as many adverse conditions as hybrid tomatoes.

When you grow and produce your own pasta sauce, pizza sauce, salsa, and diced tomatoes, you discover you need FAR more tomatoes than many of us realize.

- *Did you know that it takes approximately 35 pounds of tomatoes to make seven quarts of tomato sauce?*
- *Imagine a family of five eats one jar of tomato sauce per week. That's 52 quarts per year—and that's just for sauce, never mind salsa, diced tomatoes, barbecue sauce, dehydrated tomato powder, etc.*

If hybrid tomato production beats heirloom tomato production every time, it's worth considering and investigating what a hybrid tomato is and is not.

But Aren't Hybrids Bad?

In the recent past, I thought "hybrid" was synonymous with genetic modification and/or genetically modified organism (GMO). That is *not* the case.

Hybridization is a traditional breeding method that involves cross-pollinating two different varieties of plants to produce offspring with desirable traits. This process can occur naturally or be facilitated by humans.

INTRODUCTION

Hybridization does not involve the insertion or modification of genes from unrelated organisms; instead, it relies on natural genetic variation and selective breeding to achieve desired outcomes.

So, let's say Tomato A has remarkable disease resistance, and Tomato B is a heavy producer. We want both of those traits, so we cross-pollinate A and B to create Child Tomato C—which will be both disease-resistant and prolific. No gene splicing is involved.

Because of their selective breeding, hybrid tomatoes can better withstand disease, pests, drought, and heat—all while producing at a higher rate than heirloom varieties.

As with anything, there are exceptions. I'm sure there are some truly one-of-a-kind heirloom tomatoes out there that can outshine hybrids. (Cherokee Purple tomatoes might be one of them.) But, if high production for preservation is your primary goal in growing tomatoes, you should consider hybrids.

One quick note before we hop into the guide....

I've recently learned that GMO seeds are only sold to commercial growers. With all the "non-GMO" stamps on seed packages everywhere, I assumed that meant there are GMO seeds available to me, too. That's not the case. It appears that printing "non-GMO" on a seed package is merely a marketing ploy.

However, there can be a legitimate need to search for organic seeds vs. non-organic seeds. To be labeled "organic," the seeds must have been harvested from parent plants that weren't exposed to synthetic pesticides or fertilizers.

That means the flipside is also true—non-organic seeds are potentially harvested from parent plants that were exposed to synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, which carry the potential to persist in your plants.

I hope this helped make sense of all the lingo out there. It's our prayer that—through this guide—we can help you reduce your learning curve so you can see success more quickly than I did.

START

Seed Selection & Starting Seeds



CHOOSE YOUR SEEDS

Determinate vs. Indeterminate

We all know that timing plays a crucial role in gardening, especially when it involves heat-loving plants like tomatoes. Just as important as timing is the type of tomato you grow.

It's disappointing to invest time and effort into growing a tomato that never had a chance of being successful in your area.

To select the best varieties, you'll need to consider the length of your growing season and the growth habit of the tomato—whether it's determinate or indeterminate.

Determinate Tomatoes

- *are also known as "bush" tomatoes*
- *have a genetically predetermined growth pattern, meaning they grow to a certain height and then stop growing vertically*
- *tend to be more compact and bushy, making them suitable for smaller spaces or container gardening*
- *typically produce their fruit over a relatively short period, often within a few weeks*
- *are best if you have a shorter growing season and/or if you want a concentrated harvest for canning or preserving.*

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Indeterminate Tomatoes

- *are also known as "vining" tomatoes*
- *continue to grow and produce fruit throughout the growing season until they are killed by frost or other environmental factors*
- *have a sprawling growth habit, requiring support to keep them upright*
- *can grow quite tall (up to 7 feet!), and they continue to produce new leaves, flowers, and fruit along the main stem and side shoots*
- *are best if you have a longer growing season and/or want a continuous supply of fresh tomatoes over an extended period.*

Most tomato seed packets list the variety's growth habit and other valuable information, like days to maturity, on the back of the packet.

Here is a handy chart of popular tomato varieties for backyard gardeners:

| TOMATO VARIETY | GROWTH HABIT | DAYS TO MATURITY | BEST USE | ADDITIONAL INFORMATION |
|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|---|
| Cherokee Purple | Indeterminate | 72-85 days | Slicing, Dehydrating | Heirloom variety known for its dusky purple color and rich, sweet flavor. |
| Brandywine | Indeterminate | 80-100 days | Slicing | Heirloom with large, beefsteak-type fruits, known for their exceptional flavor and pinkish-red color. |
| Brandy Boy Hybrid | Indeterminate | 70-75 days | Slicing, Salsas | Hybrid variety derived from Brandywine, offering improved disease resistance and large, flavorful fruits. |
| Celebrity | Determinate | 70 days | Slicing | Determinate hybrid known for its disease resistance, producing medium-sized, flavorful tomatoes. |
| Mortgage Lifter | Indeterminate | 80-85 days | Slicing | Heirloom variety famous for its large, meaty fruits; historically, sales helped pay off a mortgage. |
| Early Girl | Indeterminate | 50-62 days | Slicing | Popular early-season variety with medium-sized fruits, suitable for cooler climates or early planting. |
| Black Krim | Indeterminate | 80 days | Slicing | Heirloom with deep, dusky-purple skin and rich, smoky flavor; originates from Crimea. |

| TOMATO VARIETY | GROWTH HABIT | DAYS TO MATURITY | BEST USE | ADDITIONAL INFORMATION |
|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Roma | Determinate | 75 days | Canning | Determinate type ideal for sauces and canning, known for its meaty texture and low seed count. |
| Better Boy | Indeterminate | 72 days | Slicing | Hybrid with large, flavorful fruits, resistant to many common tomato diseases; suitable for various uses. |
| Cherry | Indeterminate | 60-75 days | Snacking | Small, sweet fruits ideal for fresh eating, salads, and garnishes; available in various colors and sizes. |
| San Marzano | Indeterminate | 80-90 days | Canning | Italian variety famous for its elongated shape, thick flesh, and rich flavor; favored for sauces and canning. |
| Beefsteak | Indeterminate | 80 days | Slicing, Salsas | Large, juicy fruits, often used for sandwiches and slicing; available in various colors, including red and yellow. |
| Yellow Pear | Indeterminate | 70-80 days | Snacking, Dehydrating | Small, pear-shaped fruits with a sweet, mild flavor; adds color and flavor to salads and appetizers. |
| Amish Paste | Indeterminate | 74-82 days | Canning | Heirloom variety with large, meaty fruits, favored for sauces, pastes, and canning; good flavor and texture. |
| Black Cherry | Indeterminate | 64-70 days | Dehydrating | Small, dark-purple to black fruits with a rich, complex flavor; popular for snacking and salads. |
| Homestead | Determinate | 80 days | Canning | Heirloom variety that sets fruit even in the hottest summer conditions; still requires staking even though it's determinate. |

VIDEOS

Tomato Library



When to Pick Tomatoes



How to Make Tomato Powder (A Dehydrating Tutorial)



Ways to Use Tomato Powder



Canning Spaghetti Sauce



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Canning Green Tomatoes



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Jordan Mitchell is a wife and homeschooling mom to three precious children. When she's not whipping up a meal or out in the garden, she loves to write and encourage other homeschool mamas with practical tips and biblical truth. To God be the glory!



Surprised by Jesus, **Stacy Farrell** went from an unmarried, childless, 30-something career woman to a Christ-following wife of more than 30 years with two sons homeschooled K-12. She battled fear and overload, but survived and thrived. Author of more than 20 books—including the award-winning *Philosophy Adventure*—she loves to equip and encourage homeschool families.