Growing Tomatoes from Seed to Harvest

Tomatoes are America’s #1 garden vegetable, and growing your own from seed has its advantages. It allows you to grow the newest, coolest varieties of your choice and helps ensure stock is disease-free at planting time.
1: Common Name: Tomato  
Botanical Name: Lycopersicon esculentum  
Days to Harvest: 60 to 85 days after planting  
Planting Time: After last spring frost date  
Soil: Fertile, well-drained loam, 6.0-7.0 pH  
Water: Regular, even moisture  
Temperature: Fruiting is best with 78°-92° F days, 70°-80° F nights  
Fertilization: Apply specially formulated tomato fertilizer as directed

2: Choose tomatoes with good flavor and disease resistance that say “High performing” or “High Yielding” in the description. If you have a small garden space or grow tomatoes in containers, pick a determinant or bush tomato. Vining or indeterminate tomatoes require caging and more space.

3: Five of my favorite full-proof tomatoes include:  
‘Kellogg’s Breakfast’ – big orange slicer

4: ‘Sun Gold’ – nonstop orange cherry

5: ‘Mortgage Lifter’ – nonstop red slicer

6: ‘San Marzano Redorta’ – nonstop sauce tomato
Start tomato seeds indoors along a sunny windowsill or under broad-spectrum grow lights. It takes around six to eight weeks to grow tomatoes from seed to ready-to-plant starts.

You need several materials to start seeds indoors:
1. Tomato Seeds
2. Labels and Waterproof Pen
3. Seedling Cells and Flats (covers optional)
4. Black Gold® Seedling Mix
5. Spray bottle with water
6. Good Light Source
7. Heat Mat (optional)
8. Water-soluble fertilizer

Fill cell packs with moistened seedling mix. Then place two seeds per cell on the soil surface and sprinkle with a light cover of mix. Label packs with the tomato variety and date. Gently spray packs with water and place the trays 4-inches below the grow lights or along a sunny windowsill. Keep the mix moist and seedlings should sprout within two weeks. Placing flats on heat mats will speed up germination.

You will want just one tomato per cell pack, so pinch off the least vigorous seedling, if two sprout. Always keep sprouts lightly moist.

Caring for Tomato Seedlings
Apply light fertilizer when several leaves emerge.
13: When tomato plants reach at least eight inches or more, they are ready to harden off for outdoor planting. Tomatoes can only be planted outside when the threat of frost has passed.

14: Seedlings grown indoors need to be toughened up or hardened off to endure the wind, sunlight, and temperatures of the outdoors. To do this, place them in a protected spot outside and slowly acclimate them to the new environment over the course of a week. Then they will be ready to plant.

15: Determine your last frost date. Mine is in mid-spring, so I can plant my tomatoes by mid to late April and expect my early bush tomatoes to start producing by early July.

16: Before planting, amend garden soil with Black Gold® Garden Compost Blend and apply a continuous-release fertilizer formulated for tomatoes. Tomatoes root along the stem, so you can remove two sets of lower leaves and plant them just a few inches deeper to help them become better established, but this is not necessary.

17: Bush tomatoes require stakes, but large, vining tomatoes need strong cages. A good cage or staking system will keep the garden tidy and harvest easier. Tie tomato vines as they grow to encourage stability.

18: Tomatoes can easily become too wild and overgrown. Don’t be afraid to prune off branches that are too dense. This will also maintain good airflow, which will discourage disease.
19: Tomato harvests really start to pick up when days and nights are warm—usually by late July. Pick tomatoes as they ripen and be sure to remove rotting tomatoes from the vine and ground to keep away pests and disease.

20: Happy tomato growing!

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