

# Growing Heirloom Tomatoes – Huge Tomatoes vs. Huge Yields



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## Introduction

One of the most often asked questions in gardening is “how can I produce larger fruits/vegetables and more of them”. Gardening basics would suggest to simply provide plenty of water, nutrients, and sunlight to obtain a bumper crop from your garden. We would like to share with you, our tips and tricks that we have tried over the years that have seemed to provide the best overall results. This guide focuses on tomatoes but many of the techniques can be applied to other fruits and vegetables. There are a lot of factors affecting tomato growth that cannot be easily modified such as weather conditions and to a lesser extent soil and insects.

## Several Items affecting Tomato Growth:

- Soil Conditions
- Nutrient Availability
- Tomato Variety
- Seed/Seedling Quality
- Temperature
- Available Water
- Sunlight
- Spacing
- Disease
- Insect Pests

This guide will cover each of the above and how to optimize conditions and discuss methods for growing both giant sized tomatoes and maximizing your yields. There are probably as many recommendations for gardening success as there are varieties of seeds. We are providing these based upon what has worked well for us which may or may not be successful for others.

## Soil Conditions

Optimum soil conditions provide for a well drained garden that retains moisture within the soil, not on top, and a loose structure which allows for extensive root development. Dense clay and sandy soils can be improved by adding peat moss and compost. If using un-composted leaves or grass clippings, till them in at least 6 months prior to gardening as the composting action will lower the available nitrogen a sign of which is slow growing transplants with yellow leaves. **We till in 4-6" of shredded leaves every fall.** Peat moss or compost can be added at any time. Leaves and grass clippings can be added as a mulch at any time and will not reduce nitrogen available to the plants but provide a great long term nutrient source and conserve water.

## Nutrient Availability

As noted above, plant materials added to the soil that are not fully composted, will compete with your plants for nitrogen so either add these in the fall or use as a mulch during the current season.

The #1 mistake people make with tomatoes is over fertilizing. Many commercial liquid fertilizers are high in Nitrogen and produce huge dark green plants....but at the expense of fruit production. The following is an average nutrient make-up that we typically apply to our tomatoes based upon several available commercial organic fertilizers (the NPK numbers will vary slightly):

### N-P-K (5-5-5)

**N** - Nitrogen - Promotes leaf and stem growth

**P** - Phosphorous - Promotes blossom development

**K** - Potassium - Promotes root growth and disease resistance

**Week 1-2** - Initial seedling planting - Prior to planting, we till in an application of dry organic fertilizer with an NPK rating similar to above. At the time of planting, use a liquid fish emulsion (5-1-1) to give the seedlings an initial nitrogen boost.

**Every three weeks** throughout season - Apply dry organic fertilizer around a range of (5-5-5) per manufacturers' suggestions.

**When Blossoms Start** - Apply bone meal (4-12-0) to help increase flowering and also provides calcium to help minimize Blossom End Rot.

Note: Optimal Nutrient Absorption occurs at pH 6.5-7.5. Inexpensive pH test kits are available at most garden stores.

## Tomato Varieties

Suggested Varieties for **growing Huge Beefsteaks** include: Amana Orange, Delicious, Giant Belgium, Hillbilly, Mexico, and Old German

**Abundant producers** include: Amish Paste, Aurora, Avalanche, Campbell's 1327, Ceylon, De Pinto, Greek Domato, Holland, Homestead, Old Brooks, Martino's Roma, and Rutgers.

## Seed/Seedling Quality

Start with fresh seeds that will produce the most vigorous seedlings or pick up some healthy looking seedlings at a local greenhouse. Old seeds may not germinate well and poor quality plants can become diseased and produce poorly.

## Temperature

Seeds require 65°F-80°F to germinate. Tomatoes can be planted around 50°F. They will general blossom from 55°F-95°F. Several days **above 95°F and most varieties will drop their blossoms** until temperatures cool back down. The warmer the ground temperature, the quicker the plants will become established.

## Available Water

Tomatoes are heavy feeders for both nutrients and water. **Consistent watering of heirlooms is extremely important to success.** Heirloom skins are thinner than most hybrids and will split, usually when a heavy rain occurs after a dry period, as the tomato expands faster than the skin. Try and keep the soil evenly moist. Peat moss and compost both can help retain moisture as does plastic and natural mulch such as grass clippings, straw, and shredded leaves. Soaker hoses on a timer are a good choice and they also provide bottom watering which is preferred over top spraying as it minimizes soil splash up on leaves which can spread soil borne bacterial disease.

## Sunlight

Full sun if possible to maximize fruit production.

## **Planting and Spacing**

Preferred spacing is 2-3 feet apart to allow for plenty of air circulation to keep leaves dry and minimize disease. Caging or staking heirlooms is desirable as most are indeterminate varieties that can grow 6-8 feet tall. There are a few determinate bush varieties that need little or no staking. Plant seedlings all the way up to the top 4-6 leaves. This will aid in developing a fuller root system as roots will sprout all along the buried stem.

## **Disease**

Heirloom tomatoes are more susceptible than hybrids to many tomato diseases including Fusarium and Verticillium Wilt, Septoria Leaf Spot, Tobacco Mosaic Virus, and Root Knot Nematodes. A good balanced fertilizer program along with bottom watering will help minimize disease. Rotating tomatoes and potatoes every year if possible also helps reduce soil borne diseases. Clean up crop residue in fall and discard instead of composting or tilling into the ground.

## **Insect Pests**

The biggest, and I literally mean it, is the Tomato Hornworm. Leaf damage from these can be easily spotted and they can be hand picked and discarded. Cutworms can be a nuisance with seedlings but can be avoided by slipping a simple foil or plastic collar around the base of the seedling at soil level.

## **Final Secrets to Huge Tomatoes and Unbelievable Yields:**

**Huge Tomatoes** - Follow tips on previous pages. When fruit sets, remove all but the largest green tomato. Remove other blossom clusters so that you end up with only 3-4 tomatoes per plant. This will allow much more energy to be used for the remaining tomatoes resulting in some monsters!

**Huge Yields** - Follow tips on previous pages. As plant sets fruit, prune any side branches that appear that do not have a blossom cluster. The plant will put more energy into producing tomatoes. Be aware this is time consuming but is how some record yields have been recorded. We do not prune due to the number of plants we set out and have found that our yields are more than we can handle by applying the techniques described.

We hope these suggestions help you to produce some of the best tomatoes ever and have a great time relaxing in your garden!