

THE SAYWARD HAVEN FARM

# Tomato Growing Guide

*Practical Strategies for Growing Exceptional Tomatoes*



# Welcome to the World of Tomatoes

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There is nothing — truly nothing — like a sun-warmed tomato picked straight from your garden.

Whether you're growing in raised beds, garden rows, greenhouse tunnels, patio containers, or even a micro plant in your kitchen window, tomatoes are one of the most rewarding crops for home gardeners. They're productive, beautiful, and deeply satisfying.

This guide will walk you through:

- Choosing the right type
- Buying plants vs. starting from seed
- When and where to plant
- Feeding and watering
- Pruning with confidence
- Troubleshooting common issues
- Pest and disease awareness
- Harvesting and store for peak flavour
- Storing your harvest

This guide is designed to not overwhelm you or include complicated jargon — just clear, practical advice so you can grow tomatoes successfully.

Let's dig in. Your best tomatoes are ahead.

# Types of Tomatoes

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Not all tomatoes are the same — and choosing the right type makes all the difference.

## Growing Habits

Tomatoes have one of two growing habits: Determinate (Bush) or Indeterminate (Vining). Every type of tomato — cherry, slicer, paste, or large — falls into one of these two growth categories.

Understanding the growing habit helps you control space, plan your support system, and manage your harvest expectations.

## Determinate (Bush) Tomatoes

- Grow to a set height so you can control the space it uses
- Produce most fruit at once vs a smaller, continual harvest
- Great for canning and sauces because a good volume ripens at the same time
- Lower maintenance - they require much less pruning
- Often ideal for containers or smaller spaces

Best For:

- Small spaces
- Gardeners who don't want to prune much
- Preserving season

## Indeterminate (Vining) Tomatoes

- Keep growing and producing until frost
- Need staking or trellising
- Produce steadily all season
- Typically more pruning required

Best for:

- Fresh eating all summer
- Gardeners who want continuous harvest
- Vertical growing systems

While growing habit affects plant structure and harvest timing, most people recognize tomatoes by their fruit type.

Below are the main categories you'll encounter — though many varieties can overlap in use.

## Cherry & Grape Tomatoes

Cherry and grape tomatoes are the smallest type and are often the sweetest. They grow quickly and are usually the first to ripen, giving you that first true taste of summer.

They perform beautifully in containers, hanging baskets, raised beds, open gardens, greenhouses, or plastic-covered frames. Because they mature faster than larger varieties, they are particularly well-suited to our cooler coastal growing environment.

Varieties are nearly endless. As a general guide, yellow fruit tends to be milder, orange fruit is often sweetest, and red fruit offers the most traditional “tomato” flavour.

If you are growing indeterminate (vining) types, they will require staking and pruning.

Small, sweet, and prolific, they are often the easiest place to begin.

Our Favourite Determinate Cherry Variety - *Gold Nugget*

Our Favourite Indeterminate Cherry Variety - *Sun Sugar*



*Cherry tomatoes ripening on our vines*

## **Slicer Tomatoes**

Slicer tomatoes are typically 4–6 ounces — similar in size to grocery store tomatoes, but with far superior flavour.

Compared to larger beefsteak types, slicers grow faster and ripen earlier, making them a reliable choice for coastal climates. Indeterminate varieties provide a steady harvest into early fall, while determinate varieties tend to peak mid-season.

They are ideal for sandwiches, fresh eating, and everyday use.

- Medium to large fruit
- Ideal for sandwiches and fresh eating

Our Favourite Determinate Slicer Variety - **Tasmanian Chocolate**

Our Favourite Indeterminate Slicer Variety - **New Girl**



*New Girl Slicer Tomatoes in basket, ready for the farm stand*

## **Paste Tomatoes**

Paste tomatoes are often referred to generically as Roma types. These varieties were developed for their dense flesh, lower water content, and fewer seeds — all characteristics that improve sauce quality.

Most paste varieties are determinate, allowing for a concentrated harvest that works well for batch canning or cooking. However, indeterminate varieties such as San Marzano are available if you prefer a steady harvest over time.

If preserving is your goal, we recommend planting multiple plants to ensure you have enough fruit to process at once.

Our Favourite Paste Tomato - *Roma*



*Roma tomatoes all ready for making ketchup!*

## **Large Tomatoes**

These are the big, impressive varieties often referred to as beefsteak or heirloom types. They offer rich flavour, beautiful colours, and slices large enough to cover a piece of bread.

In our coastal growing region, careful variety selection matters. Many large tomatoes require a longer period to mature. Just as production begins to peak in late August, cooler September weather can slow them down.

For best success:

- Choose varieties suited to shorter seasons
- Plant in the warmest, most protected area available
- Provide strong support
- Protect from excessive winds

Most large varieties are indeterminate, though determinate options are increasingly available for smaller-space gardening.

Our Favourite Determinate Large Variety - *Bobcat*

Our Favourite Indeterminate Large Variety - *Striped German*



*Striped German tomato, ready for a little salt & pepper*

## A Word about Heirloom Tomatoes

The term “heirloom” technically refers to open-pollinated varieties that have been grown and preserved without alteration for at least 50 years.

The term is often used more loosely to describe non-hybrid varieties with unique colours, shapes, or flavour profiles. Heirloom varieties can be incredibly flavourful, though sometimes slightly more prone to cracking or irregular growth.

# Buying Plants vs Starting from Seed

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It starts with a seed or a plant. Many growers enjoy the accomplishment of starting tomato plants from seed. It opens them up to a vast selection of varieties to choose from. For many growers, however, the time required and the investment in equipment make them shy away from starting from seed.

Other growers buy tomato plants at box stores or online retailers, only to have the plants struggle once they get home. So what is the best way for you?



*Tomato seedlings growing in our greenhouse for the Sayward Haven Farm Plant Sale.*

## Buying Plants (The Easy Win)

Pros:

- No equipment needed - grow lights, seed trays, heat mats
- No timing guesswork
- Strong, established plants
- Saves 8–10 weeks of effort

Cons:

- Fewer varieties than seed catalogs
- Slightly higher upfront cost
- You may not know how the plants were grown or what chemicals or fertilizers they were exposed to

For most home gardeners, buying strong starter plants is the simplest and most reliable option.



*The selection of tomato seeds is endless!*

## Starting From Seed

Pros:

- Huge variety selection
- Lower cost per plant
- Fun and satisfying
- Great for experimenting
- You know what your plant has been grown with

Cons:

- Requires equipment (lights, trays, heat mats, energy)
- Timing is critical — watering, fertilizing, and potting up must happen at the right stages
- Risk of leggy seedlings
- More space needed indoors
- Higher failure rate for beginners

If you love projects and experimentation — seed starting is wonderful.

If you want tomatoes with minimal stress — buying plants is smart.

### **PRO TIP**

If you are buying plants, purchase from a trusted grower who can confirm the plants have been hardened off — gradually exposed to outdoor conditions so they can be safely planted outdoors.

# When & Where to Plant Tomatoes

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Tomatoes LOVE warmth. But not too much.

Tomatoes LOVE fertilizer. But not too much.

Tomatoes LOVE sun. But not too much.

Tomatoes LOVE water. But not too much.

Tomatoes are forgiving and will usually produce in less-than-ideal conditions, but when a few key aspects are met, you will see higher yields and improved flavour.

## When To Plant

- After all risk of frost has passed
- Soil temperature consistently above 10°C (50°F)
- Night temperatures reliably above 7–10°C

Planting too early is the #1 mistake gardeners make. If the forecast is not favourable, you may need to pot up your plants into larger pots and keep them in a warm, sunny spot during the day and a sheltered area at night.

**Cold soil = stalled growth.**

## Where To Plant

While tomato plants love sun and warmth, plants stall if temperatures consistently exceed 29°C. If temperatures consistently exceed 32°C or exceed 38°C for several hours blossoms will drop and pollination is affected.

Select a location that receives 6–8 hours of sun daily. Afternoon shade can be beneficial during extreme heat, but plants still require direct sun to ripen fruit properly.

Like most vegetables, tomatoes prefer **well-draining soil**. It is best to avoid overwatering while striving to maintain consistent moisture.

Leaves will curl if tomato plants are thirsty to minimize exposure to the sun and preserve moisture. The most important aspect of watering is to do whatever you can to prevent the leaves from getting wet. Drip irrigation or direct hand watering are preferred watering methods.

Tomatoes need:

- 6–8+ hours of direct sun
- Good airflow
- Well-draining soil
- Consistent watering

Avoid:

- Low, soggy areas
- Heavy shade
- Areas where tomatoes or potatoes grew last year (if possible)



*“To plant a garden  
is to believe  
in tomorrow”*

Audrey Hepburn

*Soil is warm enough for these healthy tomato plant starts*

## Planting Depth

Tomatoes are special — you can plant them deep if soil temperatures are consistently above 10°C. Otherwise, plant at the original soil line. Some people suggest you can plant your tomato plant horizontally if it becomes leggy before planting. However, this increases risk of disease if you are removing leaves and planting with an exposed wound.



*Tomatoes planted well apart in warm soil create a stronger plant.*

# Feed & Water Strong Plants

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Feed and water your plants properly and they will reward you with delicious tomatoes.

## Fertilization

Tomatoes are moderate to heavy feeders, but more fertilizer does not mean more tomatoes. Tomatoes thrive with consistent watering more than anything else.

At time of planting, it's important to add:

- Compost
- A balanced organic fertilizer
- Bone meal (optional for phosphorus)

Avoid high nitrogen fertilizers early on. Too much nitrogen = lush leaves, fewer fruits. We add a small amount of calcium to reduce the risk of blossom end rot.

Ensure soil is moist and water in well once planted.

During the season, feed every 2-3 weeks with a balanced organic tomato fertilizer or fish/seaweed emulsion. In our coastal growing environment we prefer fish/seaweed emulsion.

When fruit begins forming you can slightly increase potassium. Avoid heavy nitrogen based fertilizers as it will result in a leafy, green plant but lower fruit yield.

### PRO TIP

Make a plant to use organic or synthetic fertilizers. Plants fed with synthetic fertilizers require a commitment to be fed this way for the full season. Switching to organic fertilizers midway will impede the plant's overall performance.

Signs of over-fertilizing:

- Massive leafy growth
- Delayed flowering
- Very dark green foliage
- Low yields

## Watering Tomatoes

Tomatoes prefer consistent watering for optimal fruit growth.

- Daily watering is essential, wherever possible.
- Optimal time to water is no earlier than 3 hours after sunrise and no later than 6 hours before sunset. This is the best time for moisture uptake, minimizing pest and disease pressure.
- For plants grown in open adjust watering for precipitation. In our coastal growing environment we do not tend to get large amounts of rain in short periods and you will usually need to continue watering regimen throughout the season.
- Ensure water is applied to soil below. Avoid splashing or any moisture getting on the plant itself.



*At Sayward Haven Farm we use drip irrigation to ensure tomato plants keep dry.*

# Pruning and Supporting Your Plants

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Over the season, next to watering you will spend the most time pruning. Your tomato plant is pretty forgiving with most mistakes so don't be afraid to dive in!

Pruning and plant support depends on your tomato type.

## Indeterminate Tomatoes

Indeterminate tomatoes are usually trained up a trellis. As the plant grows it produces flowers (blossoms) at each level which become tomato fruits. As it grows it produces “suckers”, small shoot between the main stem and branch. Suckers will eventually produce fruit, but removing them allows the plant to focus its energy on the main stem, producing larger and earlier harvests. Fruit will be more accessible to harvest and air flow maximized.

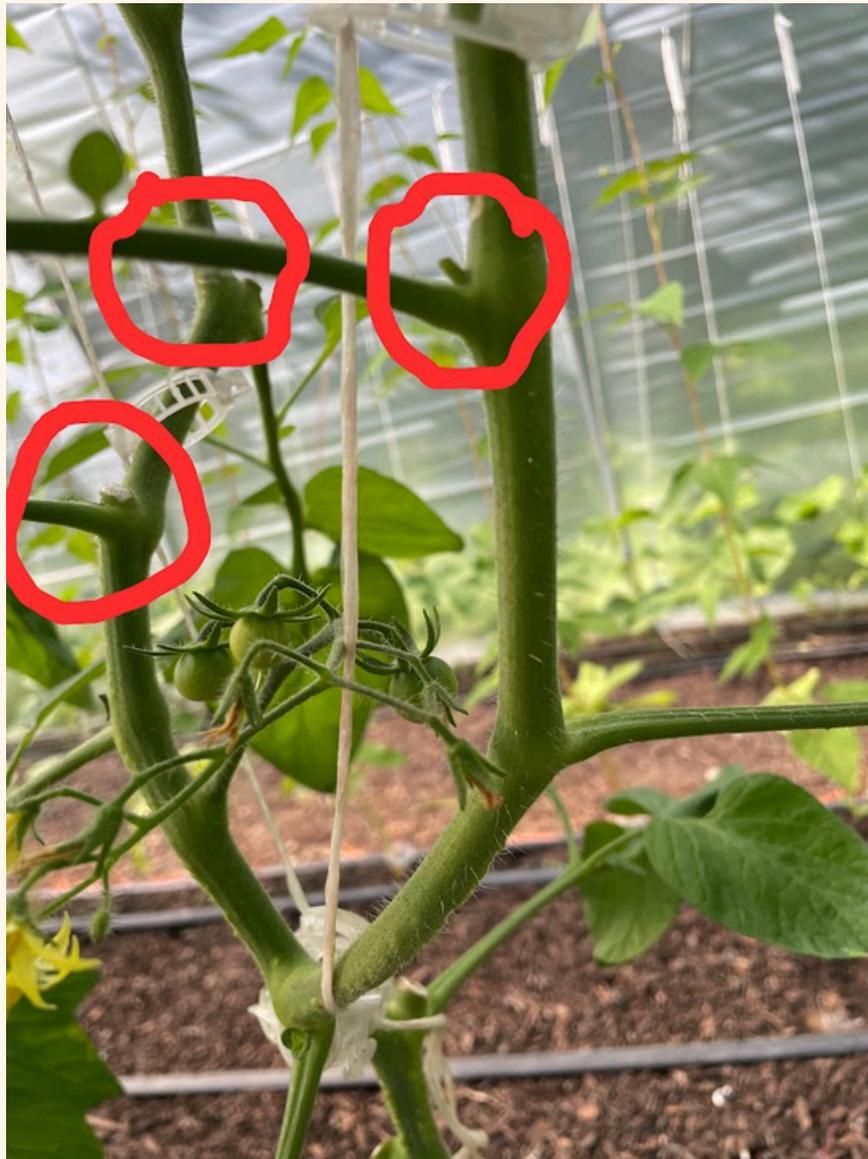
Lower leaves touching the soil should always be removed. Once you have harvested from a level, trim leaves up to the next level with fruit.

Tomatoes are susceptible to a number of air borne fungal and/or bacterial diseases. Air flow is critical to a tomato's health.

### PRO TIP

You can prune with your hands or use a knife or snips. Using your hands is efficient but may take some practice. It also prevents disease transmission. Tools can be easier but must be sterilized if you are pruning more than one plant to prevent disease transmission.

At Sayward Haven Farm, pruning tools are sprayed with a food grade hydrogen peroxide solution (2 tbsp. To 1 litre of water in a spray bottle) and wiped with a clean cloth between plants to ensure any disease remains isolated to an infected plant.



*Suckers on this indeterminate tomato plant. Removing them focuses energy on the main stem.*

## **Determinate Tomatoes**

Minimal pruning is needed. In general, remove only damaged or discoloured leaves and any bottom leaves touching the soil.

Heavy pruning can reduce yield on bush types. If air flow is an issue, prune all lower leaves up to first fruit and selectively prune leaves vs. suckers.



*Lower leaves removed and plants trained vertically to improve airflow and fruit production.*

### **PRO TIP**

Tomato plants are usually pollen laden from blossom secretions. We use thin surgical latex gloves when pruning to protect our hands from the pollen while giving flexibility to do delicate cuts. Be extra careful if you are allergic to pollen.

### **Why Prune?**

- Better airflow
- Fewer diseases
- Larger fruit
- Easier harvesting

### PRO TIP

About 6 weeks before first frost, around the beginning of September, cut the top of your indeterminate plants. Indeterminate tomato plants continue to grow and produce flowers until they die. The plant now has blossoms and fruit at different stages of maturity. By “topping” the plant it will redirect energy to mature the current blossoms and fruit rather than growing blossoms that will not have time to mature as fruit.

*Only two things money can't buy.  
That's love and a homegrown tomato.”*

Guy Clark



If the plant is healthy and productive — don't overthink it. Tomatoes want to grow.

# Troubleshooting Common Problems

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Let's cover the most common tomato problems.

## **Blossom End Rot**

Black sunken bottom on fruit. This can be a common issue, especially with roma type tomatoes.

Causes:

- Inconsistent watering
- Calcium uptake issues

Fix:

- Water consistently
- Mulch plants
- Don't over-fertilize
- Add calcium to planting area

## **Yellowing Lower Leaves**

Normal aging OR overwatering is the most common culprit.

Check:

- Soil drainage
- Avoid soggy roots

## Cracked Tomatoes

Often caused by uneven watering or rapid fruit growth.

**Good news:** Cracked tomatoes are still perfectly edible.

Check:

- Soil drainage
- Avoid soggy roots



*Cracking can occur when tomatoes grow rapidly after watering or rain.*

## Lots of Flowers, No Fruit

It is so disappointing to see many flowers but somehow they do not become fruit. While there are many possible reasons, pollination issues are the most common culprit. Tomato flowers are “perfect flowers” where the each flower contains both the female and male reproductive parts. Gentle movement will usually create self-pollination.

Give your plant a regular “tickle”, especially if it is in a location with minimal wind. Some diehard tomato growers use an electric toothbrush to vibrate the flowers early in the morning and ensure pollination.

To combat extreme heat use shade cloth, mulch or move your containers to a cooler location during a heat wave.

Cause:

- Poor pollination
- Extreme heat, day or night
- Too much nitrogen
- Inconsistent watering

## Leaf Curl

Leaf curl is your tomato plant’s way of communicating with you and saying “Hey, there is something you need to look into”. Leaves curling up are usually a sign of environmental stress - heat, overwatering or drought. Leaves curling down are usually a sign of over-fertilization. On it’s own, not serious. But if you observe leaf curl you need to address it.

Possible Actions:

- Move plant into a cooler location with part shade
- Add shade cloth
- Create a wind barrier
- Ensure watering is more consistent
- Reduce fertilization



*Leaf curl caused by heat stress*

# Pests & Diseases

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We are very fortunate in our area that we do not suffer from a lot of pest damage. At Sayward Haven Farm we grow 600 or more tomato plants each year in our high tunnels and in the field and have had very few pest issues.

## Pests

Common pests:

- Aphids
- Cutworms (young seedlings)
- Whiteflies
- Rodents (eating low lying fruit)

Control:

- Hand removal
- Insecticidal soap
- Strong water spray (sparingly, only done on a dry, sunny day in the morning)

### PRO TIP

Certain plants support growing tomatoes. Marigolds and basil are easy to grow and can repel pests like aphids and whiteflies **and** improve plant health. Nasturtiums and basil act as “trap plants” attracting pests away from tomato plants. As a bonus, they are great to eat and/or decorate the garden.

## Diseases

Due to our mild, wet environment, Vancouver Island gardeners face more disease pressure. Keeping your plant as dry as possible (not below the soil!) is your best defense. If you have your plant in an enclosed area ensure there is air flow and prune well. Rotating crops may be required for some soil borne diseases. If a plant succumbs to disease your best defense is to remove it from your garden immediately. Most diseased plants can be composted provided it is properly heated to kill the disease.

Disease prevention:

- Water at soil level
- Avoid wet leaves
- Space plants properly
- Rotate crops yearly if possible

Good airflow solves many problems.



*Early blight on a lower tomato leaf — a common issue in coastal climates.*

# Harvesting for Peak Flavour

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*Harvest tomatoes when they first show colour and allow them to finish ripening indoors.*

Harvesting is the best part of growing tomatoes. This is where all the hard work pays off.

## **BEST PRO TIP**

Tomatoes ripen from the inside out. Harvest slicer, Roma, and large tomatoes as soon as they “break blush,” when the fruit first begins to change colour from green. Once picked, store them at room temperature with no direct sun. Tomatoes will continue to ripen.

Why pick them this soon? At the point of breaking blush the tomato plant has given the fruit all it will need. Harvesting it at this point reduces the time the fruit is exposed to the weather and being susceptible to any damage.

Cherry tomatoes are different. Harvest cherry tomatoes when they have full colour and are slightly soft to touch.

At the end of the season, usually just before first frost, harvest all your tomatoes regardless of the colour. Store tomatoes at room temperature and a good percentage will ripen. The flavour may not be optimal but they will still taste better than any grocery store tomato!

Tomatoes should ideally be stored at 13-18°C in a place that rodents and other small vermin cannot access (we speak from experience here). A cold cellar is ideal. In the heat of August this may be hard. Avoid re-fridgerating as that affects flavour.

- **Never refrigerate** fresh tomatoes unless fully ripe and very soft.
- **Room temperature** = best flavour.



*Sun-ripened tomatoes — the flavour of summer.*

# From Our Farm to Your Garden

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Tomatoes are one of the most rewarding crops a gardener can grow.

With sunlight, healthy soil, and a little patience, tomato plants will reward you with abundant harvests and unforgettable flavour.

At Sayward Haven Farm, tomatoes have been part of our garden for decades. Each season reminds us that the best food begins in the soil.

Wishing you many seasons of amazing homegrown tomatoes - savour them!



*400 tomato plants growing in one of our high tunnels at Sayward Haven Farm*

## About The Farmer

Hi, I am Farmer Tracey. Along with my partner, Farmer Don, we own and operate Sayward Haven Farm. Our farm is located in Cobble Hill, BC gateway to the beautiful Cowichan Valley.

I have been growing tomatoes for 40 years. Inspired by the Little House on the Prairie books at a young age, I began gardening in my early twenties. Tomatoes, like for many gardeners, were my first foray into growing vegetables. Gardening experience is the best teacher. It has taught me to accept failure, learn from each season's lessons and build my farming skills.

I have a passion for helping people learn to grow vegetables for themselves to experience the amazing flavour of homegrown vegetables, revel in the beauty of gorgeous flowers in their gardens and benefit from eating the most nutrient dense produce which has incredible health benefits.



*Tracey in her happy place - Illustration by Laurren Huff*

**Sayward Haven Farm**  
**[www.saywardhavenfarm.ca](http://www.saywardhavenfarm.ca)**  
**Cobble Hill, BC**