

Markham Arboretum: Tomato growing tips

by Arti Kirch – Board member emerita

In my former plant business and at the Markham, I have raised thousands of tomatoes and hundreds of varieties. This level of experience helped demystify a lot of the seemingly endless and complicated advice about growing them.

Given that, I'd like to offer my opinion of what works well for me so that you can hopefully enjoy an easy summer and lovely tomatoes.

Soil Preparation

Soil preparation is **possibly the most important** part of gardening. But, when done and done right, you will rid your summer of anxiety and possibly more work to correct what should have been done first.

The **best soil is rich and crumbly** which allows oxygen and water to penetrate to the roots while also helping retain water. It also creates a much friendlier environment to the micro-organisms in the soil that are essential to almost all plant growth.

The 3 top things you can do to get this rich and crumbly soil are: **compost, compost, compost**. Compost has more benefits than I have space so let's just stick to how to get it in your garden.

- Apply compost at least 2 weeks before you plant. The more time compost has to break down the better. I add compost in the fall for spring planting.
- Work in the compost with a garden fork, going down to a depth of about 8 inches. Don't overwork yourself or the soil – breaking down the soil to dust is not a good thing.
- If your soil is compacted clay, or you suspect that it is depleted, work in good gardening soil after the compost.
- Water your prepped soil until it has the texture of a damp sponge, i.e., not dripping wet.
- Avoid walking on your prepped beds from here on out.



Variety selection



This is the fun part ☺ We always recommend getting plants from a local grower – it's why we work with Biota. Kelley, who owns [Biota](#), will help you select the tomato varieties best for you from the dozens available. Further, having lived in Concord most of her life, she has deep knowledge of our gardening conditions, raises the chemical-free seedlings about a mile from here, and won't sell a plant with an inferior root system.

Location

Tomatoes can be easily grown in containers (recommended size = a half wine barrel) or in the ground. Whatever site you choose, it should get a **bare minimum of 6 hours of sun per day**; 8 hours is really a better minimum.

Planting

Timing – Tomatoes perform best when soil temperatures are at least 60 F. This usually happens around mid-April, but it depends on the year. You can purchase an adequate soil thermometer for around \$10 if you want to be sure.

Rotation – Plant in a site different from the previous year. Many common tomato pests live in the soil, but you can usually outrun them by planting in a new location.

Spacing – Dig your holes a minimum of 3' apart. Seems like a lot, but this spacing provides a good amount of air circulation (which helps prevent some pests and plant disorders) and makes it much easier to harvest.

Depth - Tomatoes like to be planted deep. All those hairs on the stem of a young tomato plant are actually potential roots, ready to develop and suck up nutrients if they can reach the soil. I usually try to dig a 12" hole. After adding the food (see below), I re-fill the hole as needed so that after I trim off the lower leaves, I set the plant in up to its first leaves.

Staking – Do it now. Don't wait till you cannot even get in the bed and end up breaking off a bunch of stems. I use 6' tall cages that Kelley designed. (Yes, she can do anything)

Feeding – Tomatoes demand a lot of nutrition. At planting, I add the following to each hole:

- **1 fish head** for a calcium boost, which guards against blossom end rot. Any Asian-style market is likely to have them;
- **3-4 crushed eggshells**, also for calcium, which I saved over the winter;
- **1 handful of bone meal**, rich in phosphorus and critical to fruit production;
- **1 modest handful of worm castings** for a delicious first feed;
- **the recommended dose of mycorrhizae**, which are highly beneficial fungi.

After the plant is lowered into the hole and the soil carefully, gently backfilled, I top it off with a nice drink of an organic plant food formulated for tomatoes.

For successive feedings, I use a balanced organic fertilizer about once a month that emphasizes phosphorus, e.g., 4-6-4. Phosphorus, the second number in all fertilizer formulas, is key for fruit production.

Watering

Be consistent in watering tomatoes after planting. It's not good to drown them one day and follow up with a week of neglect. In addition, good watering practices, along with calcium, help prevent blossom end rot.

Stick your finger a couple of inches into the soil. If it's dry, they may need a drink, but maybe not: tomatoes like a bit of drying, even to the point of mild wilting. In fact, when my plants are well established, like late July / early August, I water only about every 2 weeks; if you grow in containers, they made need water more often. Mulch helps -- it slows down moisture loss and keeps roots cooler by shading the soil. I use straw and put it up to about 6 inches from the stem; that way, certain pests won't be able to stage an under-cover attack.