



**Swan River Gardens**

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# How to Grow Tomatoes

Nothing tastes better than a homegrown tomato. Everyone with a sunny spot should grow at least one plant every summer. Whether you try one in a pot or a whole row in the garden, here is the lowdown on getting a bountiful harvest of juicy, red, plump fruits.

**Start with:** Plants work better than seeds for Montana gardeners. You can buy plants early and let them grow on a sunny windowsill until they can be transplanted to the garden or a larger pot. Don't buy too early, but for the best selection of varieties picking up plants by early May is best. For fresh eating, one plant may be all you want. For a household of four people, you may want one plant per person. If you want to have enough tomatoes to process for canning or freezing, you may want at least six plants, maybe more. You can grow varieties for both fresh eating and processing; in fact you could grow as many different varieties as you want to try. Keep in mind that six plants does give an ample harvest for most households.

**Planting Time:** Tomatoes are NOT frost hardy so they cannot be put out until all danger of frost is passed. Typically that means towards the end of May. You will need to watch the weather and may need to protect plants from frost on the occasional cold night. Luckily the plants are small and just a bucket turned over them is plenty of protection. Be sure to remove it in the morning. Once nighttime temperatures are reliably above freezing, you can stop worrying about the plants.

**Spacing:** There are two types of tomato plants, determinate or indeterminate. Of the two, determinate types are shorter, bushier and tend to set their fruit all at once, making these varieties good for canning and freezing. Indeterminate types tend to be more sprawling and vine like, producing fruit over a longer season. The tag on the plant will tell you which kind each variety is. Tomato cages or some other kind of support is needed for both types. Generally you should allow about 3 square feet per plant. Tomatoes are an excellent choice for a container plant on a patio or deck. Use a pot that is at least 18" high and wide. You can go up to the size of a half wine barrel.

**Growing Season Needs:** Tomato plants can grow roots from any part of their stem that is underground. Typically we recommend stripping off all but the top four leaves and either placing the plant in a deep hole or gently laying it sideways and bending up the top, supporting it with soil. Since tomatoes are mostly water, robust root systems help the fruit to take up as much water as possible.

If your plant needs staking to stay upright, use sturdy poles or wires. Tomatoes are heavy and you don't want the fruit snapping off the branches. Choose a location that gets full sun for at least six hours a day. Afternoon sun is stronger than morning sun. Be sure to water your plants regularly and do not let the soil dry out. Plants that get dried out and then watered often produce blemished fruit. Good, even moisture is best.

**Harvest Time:** When fall frost threatens you can start by covering the plants with old sheets or blankets if the forecast is not too far below freezing. Before real freezes happen, harvest even the green tomatoes and bring them inside. You can wrap each tomato in newspaper and put them in a box in a warm spot. They will ripen over a week or two. Be sure to check them often, putting the ones closest to ripe on top.

Fresh tomatoes are such a treat and so easy to grow! Your gardening experts at Swan River Gardens can help you decide the best way for you to grow tomatoes and enjoy their wonderful taste.