

TOMATOES

dr compost



THE VEGE FILES

TOMATOES

Of all the plants in our fantastic five, these will need the most attention but there's nothing like a sun-ripened, freshly picked tomato out of the garden. Tomatoes are split into two groups: determinate and indeterminate varieties. Most tomatoes grown in tunnel/glass houses are indeterminate varieties which need staking and keep fruiting through the season. Those grown outside are often the bush determinate style which tend to produce tomatoes all at the same time and need minimal support.

Sow seeds indoors early, because you want your tomato plants to be a good size before they go into the garden. Prep the ground with lots and lots of compost. Big feeders = big crops!

Traditional Wanaka wisdom is to plant tomatoes out at Labour weekend or when the snow is off Mt Roy – whichever comes first. That will work for a tunnel/glass house or if you have a sheltered Wanaka garden, but if your garden is prone to later frosts (eg Albert Town or Hawea Flat) hold off planting outside for a few more weeks until frosts have passed.

1. When planting tomatoes, dig a good sized hole and place more compost into the hole. Plant the tomato up to its first set of leaves (picking these gently off).

2. You can begin with watering from above. As your tomatoes get bigger, it's better to use a ground-type watering to keep your plants healthy. Water a little and often. This avoids fruit swelling too quickly and splitting.

3. Indeterminate tomatoes need to be supported with a huge stake or long twine hanging down from the ceiling. As these plants grow you need to keep a central leader by pinching out the new side shoots. Break off the shoots as they emerge at a 45 degree angle between the leaf stalk and main leader.

4. Repeat often. If you don't, you end up with lots of triffid-like arms all trying to grow more tomatoes. Multiply these arms and the arms coming out of the arms and the and very quickly you are in a land of chaos with many, many TINY tomatoes that won't ripen.

5. When they're as tall as you can cope with, cut the top off to stop the plant growing up any more. Pick off leaves up to the first truss of tomatoes. Sometimes the plant looks a bit naked, but it allows for better airflow and ripening.

6. Tomatoes are 'gross feeders'. The more you feed them, the more bountiful the crop. Liquid feeds you can use include compost, comfrey, manure, vermicast and seaweed teas. Ideally give the plants a feed once a week. I like to side dress the tomatoes at least once during the season with a healthy amount of fresh compost.

7. Tap the vines every time you get near them. This will aid pollination rates and strengthens the plant. Pop some cardboard underneath low-hanging tomatoes to stop them touching the soil and rotting.

8. Pick tomatoes as they ripen on the vine. Plant some basil around the base of your plants. Basil is a companion plant which is supposed to make your tomatoes taste sweeter.

9. As the season draws to a close, pull out the whole or part of the vine with unripe tomatoes and leave in a warm light place in a polystyrene box. Green tomato chutneys are delish!

Recommend inside: Aunt Ruby's German Green, Black Cherry, Brandywine.

Recommend outside: Aunt Ruby's German Green, Tigerella, Yellow Pear, Sub Arctic Plenty. Think about the micro climate for outside tomatoes, like next to the glass house or a north facing wall. They want heat!!