

Limited Garden Space? Grow Tomatoes in Containers

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The tomato is by far the most popular home-grown vegetable. Though not everyone has the room for a vegetable garden it is still possible to be a tomato grower by producing them in containers.

Following are some recommended steps for producing tomatoes in containers:

Select the sunniest growing area that is available. Plants should be exposed to a minimum of 6 hours of direct sunlight per day for good production.

Choose a large container with drain holes at or near the bottom. No container smaller than a 5 gallon pot should be considered unless you plan to grow dwarf or miniature tomato plants. Ten to 30 gallon sized pots allow more room for root development and make it easier to maintain uniform moisture within the potting mixture. Containers can be of plastic, fiberglass, wood or clay. Do not use unlined copper containers.

Purchase a high quality packaged potting mixture. Choose an artificial mix made up of a combination of two or more of these ingredients: peat, pine bark, perlite, and vermiculite. The better mixtures are relatively light and come complete with the proper pH, plant starter nutrients and even added minor elements. Avoid fine textured, heavy potting mixes and definitely avoid adding soil or "yard dirt."

Select young, vigorous plants that are approximately 5 to 8 inches tall and have dark green color. Avoid extremely tall plants and those with yellow or spotted leaves. There are many varieties of tomatoes that work well in containers including Floramerica, Mountain Delight, Floradel, Walter and Florida MH - 1. The indeterminate, or vine type tomato varieties can also be used. They bear over a longer period of time, but require trellising or some other form of support. Examples of these include Better Boy, Tropic, Manalucie and Manapal. Sweet Chelsea is an indeterminate variety that produces small fruit on a large vine for many weeks during the summer.

Establish one plant per pot and water thoroughly to settle the potting mixture. A two-inch deep layer of coarse mulch, such as pine bark can be placed on the surface.

Fertilization can be provided using a water soluble complete fertilizer, a slow release product or by the careful use of a dry, granular material. Follow label directions and avoid applying excessive amounts.

Once a sizeable plant has been produced and it begins flowering, reduce the amount of fertilizer that is applied. Continued heavy fertilization can have negative effects including low fruit production, excessive growth and a damaged root system.

Proper watering is possibly the most important cultural practice. Keep the potting medium uniformly moist, but not saturated. Sharp fluctuations in moisture levels can result in poor fruit set and malformed fruit with hard, black spots.

Control leaf blights and fruit rot by spacing plants far enough apart for good air circulation. When watering, avoid wetting the leaves and stems. Sprays containing a recommended fungicide can also be used. Products containing maneb or mancozeb are often labeled for use on tomatoes and act to protect against fungal spore germination and infection. Follow label directions carefully when using these and other disease control

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products.

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