

Growing Tomatoes, Part 1

Spring is finally here and that means that tomato season is around the corner. Don't get too excited, though. Even though seedlings will be showing up in nurseries, it's best to wait to plant them.

Tomatoes need warm air and soil, as well as a lot of sunlight, to grow strong and healthy. Planting too early can leave them spindly and weak. March is a typical time of the year to plant tomatoes. One way to check if the soil is warm enough, is to sit on the ground and if it is comfortable then plant.

Choosing a proper location for your tomato garden is important. The spot should get several hours of sunlight each day. You may have a prime spot but don't overuse it. Like other members of the nightshade family, tomatoes nurture the soil fungi *Fusarium* and *Verticillium*. The soil can become infected if tomatoes are planted in the same location too many years in a row. Rotating your tomato planting locations, or changing out the soil in a raised bed, will prevent the fungus from affecting your vegetables.

Plant tomatoes deeply. First, remove a few leaves above the roots. Place the seedling at a slight angle in the hole. The plant's buried stem will push fresh roots, giving the young plant increased access to water and nutrients. Tomatoes also need a good deal of room to grow, so plant them at least two feet apart.

After your seedlings are planted in their beds, they need some nurturing. If you are concerned about hungry animals or other threats, cover the tomatoes with the top half of a large soda bottle. Not only can this keep them from becoming a snack, but it provides them with a personal greenhouse to keep them warm.

Next week, Growing Tomatoes, Part 2

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