**Grow-How**

**Growing Tomatoes Successfully**

**When and How Do I Transplant My Tomato Plants?**

While tomatoes can get away with being planted when nights are still cool, we recommend to plants when night temps will stay above 55 degrees. Plan to transplant on a cloudy day, or in the evening hours when the sun is not so bright and strong. Irrigate your plants in their containers a few hours before transplanting, so that they will be fresh and strong for their change of living quarters! At the nursery, we irrigate our transplants with a solution of [**fish emulsion and seaweed**](http://www.chileplants.com/search.asp?CategoryID=99&SearchButton=Go), and allow them to soak in this weak fertilizer solution for 10-30 minutes before planting.

Pick the spot where you want to locate your tomato plants. This should generally be a spot that receives lots of sun, is in a well drained area, and has good air circulation. Dig a hole larger and deeper than the plant you will be transplanting or as they say "dig a $10 hole for a $5 plant." Add some organic matter (compost, dried shredded leaves, well rotted manure) to the soil that you just removed from the hole and mix together. Put that mixed soil back into the hole. Now make a smaller hole with the loose, mixed soil, just slightly larger than the plant’s root ball, with a small cone-shaped handful of soil on the bottom of the hole.

Gently squeeze all the sides and bottom of the pot, to loosen the soil from the pot wall. Put your fingers on top of the pot and soil, with the stem between your fingers. Turn the pot over, and gently tap the bottom of the pot; the entire plant and root ball should slide out easily. With a knife or your fingers, cut an "X" approx.1" deep in the bottom of the root ball. Turn the plant stem side up, and gently extend the 4 "legs" down from the X you just cut, so that all the roots are now pointing down. They may also be spread apart so that they are pointing in 4 directions (North, East, South and West).

Place the transplant into the hole, with the 4 "legs" straddling the cone shaped mound of soil on the bottom of the hole. This will allow the roots to grow outwards in all 4 directions, and increases the root spread. Place the tomato plant at the same level or slightly deeper than how it was growing in the pot. Backfill with more of the same loose, mixed soil, and when done tap down the soil down around the stem to press out any large air bubbles that may have gotten trapped. Place some sort of mulch around the plant as well, which will help keep the soil cool and moist.

Water the plant well, around the base of the plant in rings, so that the whole area of mixed soil gets moistened. Water deeply, so that the roots get moistened. You can use plain water, or the remainder of the weak fish emulsion and seaweed solution that was used to irrigate the plants before planting.

**When and How Do I Fertilize My Tomato Plants?**

We use [**organic fertilizers**](http://www.chileplants.com/search.asp?CategoryID=99&SearchButton=Go) on all of our plants. While a plant will uptake and utilize an inorganic fertilizer the same as an organic fertilizer without knowing the difference, your soil certainly will know the difference. Organic fertilizers promote the good bacteria and soil microorganisms which are essential for good plant health. They encourage earthworms and other soil organisms which are good at aerating and loosening the soil. [**Fish emulsion and seaweed**](http://www.chileplants.com/search.asp?CategoryID=99&SearchButton=Go) work well for us and we recommend them highly. We use a dilute solution to soak our transplants in before planting. For tomatoes, we fertilize for the first few weeks to promote good root growth. Then we fertilize monthly. Fish emulsion is high in nitrogen and promotes strong growth and good deep green leaf color. Seaweed is high in potassium, which promotes good root growth. As well, seaweed is full of many micronutrients, a sort of “multivitamin” for plants! It also helps combat the stresses that plants are subjected to, such as heat, drought, and insect attack. We also use an [**organic granular fertilizer**](http://www.chileplants.com/search.asp?ProductCode=GRAN8&ChileForm=&SearchMode=&LengthID=&WidthID=&UseID=&Color=&Location=&Keyword=&HeatID=&TypeID=&CategoryID=99&SeasonID=&NewProduct=&Letter=&SearchButton=Pressed), which offers longer term nutrition. This is especially necessary for container grown plants. We use this fertilizer in our planting beds and in our larger containers, and find that it increases our yields tremendously. The key factor for an abundant harvest is proper fertilization.

**What Tomato Plants Would Do Best In My Area?**

Most tomatoes will do well in most areas of the country. In areas that have a short growing season, we recommend [**Early Season varieties**](http://www.chileplants.com/search.asp?CategoryID=6&TypeID=&UseID=&Color=&SeasonID=1&SizeID=&DeterminancyID=&Location=&SpeciesCode=&StockStatusID=&Keyword=&Search=True&SearchMode=&SearchButton=Go). These are varieties that produce in the shortest amount of time, or early in the season. In short growing season areas it is very helpful to keep your plants actively growing by using [**organic fertilizers**](http://www.chileplants.com/search.asp?CategoryID=99&SearchButton=Go) before, during and after planting out.

**When Is The Best Time To Plant Tomatoes In My Area?**

You want to plant tomatoes when the nighttime temps will stay above 55 degrees, and the ground is warm. Planting too early oftentimes will produce very unsatisfactory results, and will actually lose you time to harvest, as the plants are set back. See our [**Safe Planting Date Map**](http://www.chileplants.com/safeplanting.asp). To get things going earlier, place black or clear plastic down where your garden will be, a few weeks before planting, to heat up the soil. Or pot them up into a slightly larger pot (4-6" in diameter), using a potting soil (we DO NOT recommend Miracle Gro Potting Mix). If they will remain in these larger pots for more than 2-3 weeks, fertilize with low levels of [fertilizer](http://www.chileplants.com/search.asp?CategoryID=99&SearchButton=Go) weekly.

**How Do I Get The Soil Ready For Planting?**

The first step in growing healthy plants is to have healthy soil. The extra effort that you put into preparing the soil will be repaid handsomely with the extra health and yield of the plant.

If this is a new garden, be sure to dig deeply, at least 12" and add lots of organic matter. This includes compost, shredded dried leaves, and dehydrated cow manure. Don’t skimp on the organic matter, as it loosens and aerates the soil, helps keep moisture within, as well as adding nutrients.

If this is an existing garden, try not to plant tomatoes in the same spot more than once every 3 years. This will help keep the tomatoes growing strong and lessen the chance of your plants becoming susceptible to soil-borne diseases. If you must plant in the same location every year, you must add lots of organic matter to your garden every year, equal to the amount of production that you took from your garden the year before. Extremely helpful is our organic granular fertilizer, which will add essential nutrients to your garden and make up for any soil deficiencies.

**How Far Apart Should I Plant My Tomato Plants?**

We plant our Tomato plants 36" apart, with rows 36" apart. Be sure that you either stake, cage, fence or otherwise keep your plants from falling on the ground. Tomatoes are tall vining plants, especially cherry tomatoes, and they need to be constrained in some manner for best results. Very important is to keep air completely circulating your plants, and not letting them turn into a jungle. Never allow smokers to touch your tomato plants, as Tobacco Mosaic Virus is passed this way. Also, do not work around or tend your tomato plants when they are wet from either rain or dew.

**To pinch or not to pinch?**

And that is a good question. We are talking about pinching out the suckers that occur between the stem and the side branches. We do not pinch. We feel that the more you fuss with your plants by pinching, the more open wounds you are making on your plant, and the more areas for anything funky to get inside. Plus, we usually are too busy to take the time to pinch all of our tomatoes! But many feel that pinching gives the plant more energy, and more tomatoes. I don't really know, we get lots of tomatoes without pinching. So the question remains. Pinch some and don't pinch others and see what you think.