

5 Tips for Growing Tomatoes in Containers

By Kerry Michaels, About.com Guide

Tomatoes are the Holy Grail for many gardeners. Growing tomatoes in containers can be hugely satisfying or a flat out disaster. Sometimes there is nothing you can do to prevent tomato fail - bad weather, late blight or critter problems. However there are some things that you can do to improve your chances for tomato success.

1. Use Really Big Containers



One of the most important things you can do to ensure tomato success is to use a big enough container - the bigger the better. For one plant (unless it's a very small tomato variety), you need a pot or container that is at least a square foot - 2 square feet is better. Five gallon buckets (the ones you get at hardware stores, or for free at restaurants or food factories) are the perfect size for one plant. I use a large size reusable grocery bag and that's a perfect size too.

I'm a tomato fanatic and grow them primarily for food, not for looks, so I put one plant per container (unless it an Earthbox or an enormous container or raised bed). Lot of people suggest growing herbs and other plants in the pot too. Not me. It's hard enough to give tomatoes the consistent amount of moisture they need without throwing other plants that will compete for the water.

Also fill up that large container with a good quality potting soil and make sure you have good drainage

2. Water, Water and More Water (But not too Much!)

The key to tomato success is to give your tomato plants a consistent amount of water, which can be the biggest challenge for growing tomatoes in pots. The goal is to keep the soil moist, not wet. Too much water and your plant's roots will rot. Too little water and your plants will get weak and your tomatoes will get blossom end rot.

Too little water and then too much water and you will have tomato disaster. The easiest way to deal with this is to use self-watering containers. Otherwise, you will have to check your tomatoes every day. I often find in the heat of the summer, or if it's hot and windy, I have to water twice a day.

If you have too much rain, protect your tomatoes by moving them into a sheltered area or cover them - if they are small enough.

Also, water in the morning (plants take up and use water more efficiently in the morning) and water the soil, not the plants.

3. Feed Your Tomatoes

It is critical that you feed your tomatoes. Most potting soil (which is essential for growing almost anything in containers), has no nutrients in it (be sure to check on the bag to make sure it doesn't already have fertilizer mixed in). You will need to add a slow release fertilizer to your potting soil, making sure to mix it in throughout your container. I like both Bradfield Organics or Espoma, tomato specific fertilizers, but you can use any all-purpose, slow release fertilizer.

I then give my tomatoes a watering with a diluted liquid kelp meal and fish emulsion fertilizer every week or every other week, depending on my industriousness.

4. Give Tomatoes in Containers Sun - Lots

Most people way overestimate the amount of sun they get. So really figure out if your tomatoes are getting enough sun. 6+ hours full sun is the minimum and 8+ hours is better. Either use a sun calculator or go out and check your tomato containers several times over the day and time how much sun your tomatoes are getting. If they aren't getting enough sun, move them to somewhere they will.

Make sure to harden off your tomato seedlings - too much early exposure to wind and sun can weaken or kill your small plants.

Tomatoes also like heat, so don't put them outside before it gets really warm (nights 50 °F), or be ready to move or protect them from the cold.

5. Plant Tomatoes Deeply

Most plants will not thrive if you plant them deeply, tomatoes are different. Roots will develop from stems that are under ground and your tomatoes will be stronger and healthier. Dig a hole so that most of your plant is covered by soil, making sure that you remove all the leaves below the soil line. If your pot isn't deep enough to sink the tomato deeply, (though it should be if you followed item 1!) you can also lay the plant on it's side and bury it that way.

Tip 5. 5 Choose great tomato varieties. There are a lot of bad tomatoes out there - mealy and tasteless - even heirlooms, so make sure you are planting tomatoes you will love.

Common Mistakes Growing Tomatoes in Containers By Kerry Michaels, About.com Guide

Growing tomatoes in containers is almost always an adventure. It can be incredibly rewarding, or flat out disastrous. Sometimes epic failure can happen for reasons beyond your control like tomato blight or a ridiculously wet or cold summer. But there are some common mistakes (trust me, I've made all of them, many more than once) that if you can avoid them, will vastly increase your chances of growing tomatoes in containers successfully.

Small Containers:

When it comes to tomato containers, bigger is better. The bigger your container, the more soil it will hold. The more soil you have the better the soil holds water. Also, the more soil the more available nutrients for your plants. Consistent water and food are two of the most critical elements for happy, healthy tomato plants and large harvests.

Too Much Water:

Watering your tomato plants properly is probably the main key to tomato success. Too much water and the plants drown, too little and you get blossom end rot. Inconsistent watering will get you blossom end rot, split tomatoes and stressed plants. So here's a critical thing you must do for tomato success (and the most difficult if you are using conventional pots instead of self watering). You want to keep the soil in your pots consistently moist - not wet, but damp. Before you water, check if your soil is already moist. To do this put your finger into the soil about an inch. Add water if the soil feels dry to the touch. Don't forget drainage too. Make sure your pot has large holes in the bottom so excess water can drain out. Pot feet are also a good idea if you have your pot on a patio or non-porous surface. Add water until it drains out the bottom of your pot. That way you will know that all of the roots, even those at the bottom of the pot, have gotten watered.

Too Little Water:

The amount of water your tomato plant needs will depend on a few things including the weather. Wind, heat, humidity, the size of your pot and the kind of potting soil you use will affect how often you need to water. By mid-season, a large tomato plant may need watering at least once a day - sometimes twice. Also, when you water, make sure to really soak your plants – if you just give them a sip, the water will only wet the top layer of soil. When you water, try to water the soil directly, not the leaves, because wet leaves can lead to fungus.

Overcrowding:

Putting lots of plants in one pot may seem like a good idea, but it usually is counterproductive. Unless my pot is tremendous (more like a raised bed) I only put one tomato plant per pot. To get an idea of minimum size, I have successfully grown one huge tomato plant in large reusable grocery bag and that's about as small as I'd go per plant.

Not Enough Sun:

Tomatoes are sun lovers and need full sun - which means that they need unobstructed, direct sunlight for 6-8 hours a day - no cheating or skimping. Many people (myself included) chronically overestimate how much sun an area gets. Really figure this out - either with a watch or a sunlight meter - before you plant up your pots. Also, the amount of that hits a spot can change dramatically over the growing season, so check every week or so to make sure there are no obstructions blocking the sun.

Chilly Tomatoes:

Along with sun, tomatoes like warm temperatures. While it might feel like you're getting a jump on the season by putting your tomatoes out early, they will not really do anything until it is consistently warm. If you do want to get a jump on the season, you can either cover your tomatoes with cloches, or plastic when it's cold, or do what I generally do which is to put them on carts and wagons and haul them in and out of my garage until temperatures warm up. Also, don't forget to harden off your seedlings.

Starving your plants:

Tomatoes are heavy feeders and need to be fertilized, if you aren't using a pre-fertilized potting soil. Most potting mixes have very few of the nutrients that your plants require to grow and be healthy so you will need to add those nutrients to the soil, or stimulate the ones already there, if your mix is heavy on compost. There are many fertilizers to choose from but I use either an all-purpose, organic slow-release fertilizer, or one designed especially for growing tomatoes or vegetables, which I mix into my potting soil. In addition, I use a diluted fish emulsion/seaweed liquid, once every week or two.

Choosing the Wrong Variety of Tomato:

I disagree with conventional wisdom here that recommends growing tomatoes with "patio," in their name. I think that most patio tomatoes taste, well, more like patio pavers than tomatoes. I love growing huge luscious tomatoes and sprawling cherry tomatoes. To me tomatoes are all about taste and texture and I don't want to bother growing them if they aren't totally delicious.

Staking or Caging too Late:

This is one of my chronic mistakes. I always forget how fast tomatoes grow and don't stake or cage them until they are huge and unwieldy. It is much better to set up your cages or stakes before your tomatoes get too big.