

# NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

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## Growing Tomatoes 101

Tomatoes are the most popular vegetable crop to grow in the garden. There are many ways to grow them in about any garden situation with just a few basic rules.

There are hundreds of varieties of tomatoes, varying in size, shape, color, plant type, disease resistance, and when fruit matures. Main crop tomatoes have medium to large fruit with significant yields. Small-fruited salad tomatoes (cherry tomatoes) offer smaller fruit in copious amounts, often picked in clusters. These and dwarf tomatoes have increased in popularity as more gardeners use containers on decks and patios instead of traditional large gardens.

All tomato plants fall into one of two types, determinate or indeterminate. Determinate types will form a flower cluster at the terminal growing point and stop growing in height. Indeterminate will form lateral clusters and potentially keep growing in height indefinitely.

Basic needs of a tomato plant are full sunlight, warm weather, water, and soil nutrients. Less than full sun will lead to less fruit. Most garden tomatoes grow best with some type of support system, such as cages, towers, staking, or trellises.



Tomatoes can sprawl on the ground but use more space and often have more leaf and fruit disease issues. Cages are popular because they give higher yields per area, require little labor, and can be reused.

Serious major disease concerns of tomatoes include both fusarium and verticillium wilt. These are fungal diseases that live in the soil and become more of an issue the longer tomatoes are grown in the same garden area. The best defense is using resistant cultivars, typically shown as V and F resistance on garden center plant tags and in catalogs. Rotating where crops are grown also helps lessen the threat.

Mulching is strongly recommended when growing tomatoes. This helps maintain uniform soil moisture and temperatures, in addition to keeping fruit cleaner and reducing weeds. Mulches can be organic material, such as straw, or synthetic material, like black plastic.

The most frequent problem when growing tomatoes is blossom end rot. You go to pick a ripening tomato and find the underside rotten away. This is not a fungus, but a disorder due to lack of calcium entering developing fruit, typically caused by fluctuating soil moisture. The solution is to mulch and water uniformly. Try to avoid getting foliage wet when watering to lessen foliar disease concerns.

Tomatoes like warm weather, so it is suggested to wait until late May to safely put out transplants. Now is the time to start growing the crop for 2024!

Interested in learning more about  
Horticulture in Iron County?  
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