

How to grow the Perfect Tomato in the AZ Low Desert

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- Key to successful tomato gardening in Arizona is to choose fast maturing varieties.
- Choose your seed varieties wisely!!!
- Tomatoes that do well here include cherries, plum and smaller fruiting types.
- Choose quick maturing varieties. Look at the seed packet.

What varieties to sow and when??

In order to be successful, plant varieties that ripen in less than 90 days. The packet will say anything between 65 – 80 days, number of days from transplant to harvest. This ensures plants have grown enough flowers and produced enough pollen when the day time temperatures are below 95 degrees and night time temperatures are above 55 degrees. Then they are able to set fruit before it gets too hot.

Tomatoes are self-pollinating. If the mature plant is flowering well, but not setting any fruit, either -

1. Night-time temperatures below 55 degrees and/or
2. Day-time temperatures above 95 degrees.

Thus, no fruit, not your fault.

Tomato Terms – what do they mean?

Tomatoes are either Determinate or Indeterminate. What does that mean??

- Determinate – grows to a certain size, produces crop all at once.
- Indeterminate – keeps on producing as long as it can. Vining.

Best Tomatoes for Hot, Dry Climates

- Choose varieties that have short growing seasons Short- to midseason maturity. Tomatoes that flower early (even when nighttime temperatures are cool) and reach the picking stage sooner than later can be harvested before the desert climate's hottest season.
- Native varieties usually do well.
- Varieties that are heat and drought tolerant may survive better.
- Disease resistance. Early blight spreads easily in hot climates.
- Thick stems. Helps tomatoes withstand wind and exposure - so common in hot, dry climates.

Some Heirloom tomato varieties that do well here -

- Mortgage Lifter
- Green Zebra
- Cherokee Purple
- Good Cherry tomato for Low Desert: Sun Gold Cherry

- Punta Banda - From the Punta Banda Peninsula in Baja CA. Plants produce red, meaty thick-skinned fruits, despite heat, water stress and poor soil. Great paste tomato.
- Chiapas - From the State of Chiapas in S Mexico. Ancient heirloom variety. Sprawling plant with small leaves and currant sized fruit. A good keeper.

Growing from Seed - Sow tomato seed indoors the week of Thanksgiving – December.
Buy transplants if not sowing from seed – choose strong, healthy transplants.

Soil

Good soil is the foundation of growing great tomatoes. Build up the soil with good practices such as composting, green mulch and crop rotation. Soil should be well drained, neutral to slightly alkali.

Planting

Time to plant - Feb to early March in SW Desert Zones 9-10. Late January is possible. Early plantings will need frost protection, such as Wall o'Water. Do not plant too early or soil will not be warm enough. If planted in cold soil, the tomato plants will just sit there, and this can encourage diseases and insects. Can plant sideways.

Watering

Water deeply and regularly as tomatoes have deep roots. Do not irrigate overhead as this encourages disease. Irregular watering can cause cracking of the fruit and blossom end rot. Reduce watering as fruit ripens, to discourage splitting and to encourage more fruit formation. It also intensifies the tomato flavor.

Fertilizing

Too much nitrogen will result in lush green growth, but not a lot of fruit.

Prune, Train and Mulch! –_try to keep fruit off the ground.

Harvest and Watch for Pests and Diseases

Some Tomato Seed Sources

- Native Seed Search – based in Tucson
- Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds
- Botanical Interests
- Seed Savers Exchange
- Seeds of Change

Of course, you can always try saving your own seed – an Heirloom specific to your own garden!