

Growing Tomatoes in Illinois

Although tomatoes can be direct-seeded into the garden, most gardeners use plants either grown by themselves or purchased from a reliable plant dealer. To have tomatoes throughout the season, grow both early and main crop varieties.

Allow suckers to develop two leaves, then prune. Remove all tomato suckers that develop below the first cluster of fruit. Above the first cluster, let the suckers grow two leaves before pruning.

To stake a tomato plant, tie a string tightly around the stake and loosely around the plant. Tie a knot just below a branch so that the plant cannot slide down.

When setting the plants into the garden, be sure to transplant them properly and use a starter solution. Space plants so that you have about nine square feet of space per plant if they are not staked or caged. Staked or caged plants may be spaced more closely.

Tomatoes can be grown successfully either on the ground or staked, but plants grown on the ground require less work, produce more per plant, and are less susceptible to blossom-end rot. The advantages of staking are cleaner fruits, no loss from soil rot or anthracnose and, sometimes, easier picking. If you grow tomatoes on the ground, mulching will reduce anthracnose and fruit rots, and help to keep the fruits clean. Also, the mulch will conserve moisture and control weeds.

There are several methods of staking and pruning tomatoes. A modified system which has been found to do well in Illinois is suggested here: Shortly after transplanting, drive a stake about 6 feet long and 1½ inches in diameter into the soil 8 to 10 inches deep and 3 inches away from each plant. When the

plants are 12 to 15 inches high, remove all but one main stem and tie it loosely to the stake, using soft twine or cloth. As the plant grows, remove the shoots or "suckers" which develop between the main stem and the leaves, up to the first fruit cluster. Above the first fruit cluster, let the shoots develop two leaves and then pinch off the tips. Tie the plant loosely to the stake every 10 to 12 inches (Fig. 6). Diseases in tomatoes can be greatly reduced by good cultural practices and carrying out a fungicide dust or spray program.

Harvest the fruits when they are pink except during periods when the daily mean temperature is above 70° F. At such high temperatures pick the fruits just as they are turning color and keep them at 68° F. for further coloring. These fruits will be firmer and have better flavor than those ripened on the vine when temperatures are high. Fruits exposed to direct sunlight will reach a temperature 20 degrees higher than that of shaded fruits.

In the fall just before the first frost, pick the large green fruits as well as the riper fruits. Ripen these fruits at about 60° to 70° F. in the dark. By sorting them out every 2 or 3 days you will have a gradual supply for about a month.