Growing Great Tomatoes

To grow great tomatoes there are some basic guidelines to follow regarding timing, pruning and harvesting. Tomatoes are native to South America, where it is hot and sunny all year! In our climate, tomatoes need to be started indoors in March in order to give them a long enough growing season to ripen fruit.

Starting tomatoes indoors
A windowsill, no matter how sunny, does not have enough overhead light to grow a healthy tomato start. You can grow them in a warm greenhouse, or you can buy indoor plant lights specifically made to grow vegetables. But don’t worry, if you don’t want to buy all this equipment, you can simply wait until May and then buy tomato starts from your local garden store or your local farmer’s market.

Tip: If you are looking for heirloom varieties of tomatoes, try your local farmers market during the month of May. They will be a little more expensive, but you will have very healthy, usually organic and interesting varieties that are not available from garden retailers.

2 Different Categories of Tomatoes
All the different varieties of tomatoes can be divided up into 2 distinct categories: Vining tomatoes (also called Indeterminate) and Bush tomatoes (also called Determinate). It’s important to know what type of tomato you have, as they grow very differently.

Vining (Indeterminate) tomatoes:
Vining (Indeterminate) tomatoes grow up and bear their best fruit from their central vine. To ensure you get ripe, healthy fruit it helps to prune vining tomatoes quite vigorously. The proper pruning technique involves pinching off “suckers” while always leaving flower branches that come from the main vine. Also, do not remove the growing tip of the central vine of a vining type tomato. This will stop it from growing.

Bush (Determinate) tomatoes:
Bush (Determinate) tomatoes grow in all directions and generally stop growing in height at about 3 feet. They don’t need to be pruned, as they will bear fruit on all their branches equally, but if your tomato is so dense with leaves that you cannot see the fruit, it is a good idea to thin out the leaves to let both light and air circulate into the whole plant. Bush tomatoes need to be supported by a tomato cage.
Tomato Health!

Most tomato diseases come from the soil. A good precaution is to prune all the lower leaves off your tomato, so that none are touching the soil. Also, when you water, take care not to splash soil onto the leaves of the plant, and not to get water on the leaves of the plant (if possible). Mulching around the base of the tomato plant with straw, leaves or grass clippings will help prevent soil from splashing onto leaves, and will help keep your tomato roots moist and happy.

**Blossom End Rot**
This condition is the result of not enough calcium getting to the fruit as it develops. It is usually caused by infrequent watering. Anytime a tomato roots are completely dry, the plant cannot get calcium.

Avoid this disease by regularly watering tomatoes and by putting mulch around the base of your plant in the hot summer weather to prevent the soil from drying out quickly.

**Late Blight**
This disease is the scourge of tomato growing on the West Coast. Late blight, which occurs in early fall, can only be avoided if plants are grown under cover, either in a greenhouse, or under an overhang – and even then, they often succumb to this disease as the weather gets colder.

The best way to deal with late blight is to harvest your tomatoes before it occurs.

**Late Blight Tips:**
1. Choose tomato varieties that ripen early - look for varieties that have between 60 – 90 days to maturity for your best chance at ripe tomatoes!
2. Pay attention to the weather forecast. When the air temperature drops in September, and there is lots of rain, these are the perfect conditions for late blight. Any time after the beginning of September, harvest all remaining tomatoes, even if they are green, before a long stretch of cool temperatures and rain.
3. If Late Blight gets to your tomatoes, destroy any infected plant to avoid spreading the disease to your neighbors’ tomatoes.

**Got green tomatoes?**
Tomatoes will ripen indoors very easily. Simply place them in a paper bag, or a closed cardboard box (do not leave them on the window sill or put them in the sun, they will simply dry out) at room temperature, and check on them every few days, as they can ripen quite quickly in a warm room.