

## TOMATO PLANTS FROM SEED TO SALE DAY

I want to give you a refresher course on the path to growing tomato plants from seed to sale day. Since you recently received information on seed starting and transplanting seedlings, I will not repeat that. I do want to remind you that every time you transplant a tomato plant, bury it deeper than it was. This allows the plant to grow more roots. I know that all of us growers do not have the same circumstances for growing plants so hopefully there will be some useful information in this for all of you.

I assume that the majority of you will be seeding soon. After your seedlings are off the heat, they need to be placed in a cooler area for a few days (60 degrees is ideal) and lots of bright light. If they will be in cooler temperatures at night, they will need some protection as they cannot go from 60 to 40 degrees overnight. Tomato plants need to be brought down to the lower temps **gradually**. I use heat mats in my greenhouse and on those cold nights, I place pencils between the heat mat and the tray of tomatoes and I cover them with a double layer of row cover. If you use heat mats with thermostats, you can skip the pencil trick. We are just trying to keep the roots warm, not hot. I turn the heat off in the mornings and uncover them. As they grow, I turn the heat on a little later at night and off earlier in the morning to get them used to the lower temps. My goal is to have the pots off heat at least a few days before transplanting them to gallon pots. (A warming bed can also be used in a cold frame or greenhouse in place of the heat mats.) A few years ago, I would carry my plants back into the house during cold nights. (I'm glad I wised up a little!!)

We need to plant our seedlings into gallon pots 2-3 weeks before the sale (no later than 2 weeks) as they need time to settle into the gallon pots before they are sold. An ideal height for transplanting is 6", but if the plant is full it can be planted at 4" if you are running out of time. At two weeks before the sale, it is advisable to add a liquid fertilizer to the plants so they will look healthy and green for the sale. The fertilizer should not have a high nitrogen level. We are more interested in the plant establishing roots than fruit. By sale day, the ideal height is 12" to 16" tall.

Remember to stake tomatoes and anchor their trunks to the stake. This is to prevent them from getting broken from wind or as they are slid in their tight rows at the sale. I would advise staking them during the last week before the sale. The plants grow rapidly in the gallon pots so you will have a better idea how long to cut your stakes. Also, if staked too soon, you may end up with crooked trunks by the time of the sale.

Remember to put in your plant tags and to put your identification mark on the back of the tag. The day before the sale, please drench the plants as they will be sitting for one or two days and will dry out.

Thank you all for taking time to grow tomatoes for our biggest fundraiser of the year!!

If you have questions, please ask.

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