

Starting Tomato Seeds Indoors



In northern climates, tomatoes should be started indoors 6-8 weeks before the last spring frost. In our USDA Zone 5-6 of Southeast Michigan, we start seeds April 1st. Starting seeds indoors allows a gardener to get about 2 months of tomato harvest in the summer before the arrival of the fall frost.

Tomato seeds are relatively easy to start indoors. Most importantly the plants need **good quality soil**. Tomato plants are tough and can withstand sub-standard light such as a sunny window or a cheap fluorescent light fixture; however, optimal light is provided with 16 hours of light from a quality light fixture (see below).

Once your seedlings are ready to go outside, be sure to follow the instructions for **"Hardening Off"** to ease the transition to outdoors; otherwise your plants will be highly stressed. Follow these tips below for the best success!

Seed Starting

- Supplies:
 - Soil: we recommend Vermont Compost's Fort Vee or Fort Light soil products available from Fedco. For beginners, we recommend this seed starting kit:
<https://www.highmowingseeds.com/seed-starting-kit.html>
 - Tomato seeds will germinate at any temperature between 65° - 90°F, though they will germinate best at 80-86°F. To provide this heat we recommend using a seed heating mat
<https://www.hydrofarm.com/p/MT10006>
 - Container: any type of container with a drainage hole in the bottom will do
- Starting seeds
 - In USDA growing Zone 5, start seeds April 1st.
 - Sow several seeds per container
 - Seed depth: ¼"
 - Label with variety name and date
 - Keep seeds evenly moist but not overly wet until germination
 - Once germinated
- Remove plants from heating mat
- Remove all but the one strongest seedling in each container

Growing Tomato Seedlings

- Light
 - Tomato plants are tough and can be started indoors in sub-standard light such as a sunny, south-facing window.
 - Ideally, provide 16 hours of light per day with a light fixture such as T5 fluorescent or High Pressure Sodium; if you use a light fixture, be sure to follow the instructions regarding the distance between plants and light bulbs → too close will burn plants
 - Plug light fixture into a timer and set it for 16 hours on per day (timer available from your local hardware store)
 - Provide air circulation with a small oscillating fan set to low blowing between your plants and the light
- Plant growing temperature → 65-75°F; if you are using lights, be sure it does not get too hot under the lights
- Water: keep plants moist but not wet
- Fertilizing:
 - If you used a compost based soil mix (such as Vermont Compost's) you do not need to fertilize your plants
 - Otherwise, use fish/seaweed liquid fertilizer weekly as directed on product

Prepare Plants For Planting (aka "Hardening Off")

- Be sure to Harden Off your plants before planting them outside. This process takes 1 week and is necessary to acclimate your "wimpy" indoor-grown seedlings for new outdoor conditions (wind, strong sunlight, and temperature fluctuations)
- To harden off plants:
 - Start by placing your plants in a sunny, outdoor location for 2 hours then put them back under the lights indoors. Each day, increase the amount of time (by 1.5 hours) that the plants spend in the sun until they spend all day and night outside.
 - Alternatively, place plants outdoors in a protected (non-windy) location where they will receive only 2 hours of morning sunlight and be in the shade for the rest of the day. Bring them in at night for the first few nights. Each day, place your plants in a location that will receive more sunlight and wind so that in 7 days they will be spending all day and night outside (this can be accomplished by locating them farther and farther away from the source of shade/wind protection)

Planting

- Choose a location in full sun where soil has been amended with organic compost/fertilizer.

- Plant spacing: 1.5 – 2 feet apart
- Planting depth: plant deep so that tomato stems are buried (with some stem and leaf sticking out)
- Label plants with variety name (if desired)
- Water immediately after planting
 - Water the root area of each plant separately several times
- Record in garden journal if desired (date, variety(s), number of plants planted, location)