



LEFT A match made in heaven: tomatoes with the ingredients for home-made pesto. RIGHT 'Tomatoberry' is a new crunchy, flavoursome, bright red variety.



Tomatoes

Sweet and juicy, these brightly coloured fruits are easy to use and taste delicious whether eaten raw or cooked in a seasonal dish

PHOTOGRAPHS MICHELLE GARRETT WORDS JACKY HOBBS

In our family, tomatoes have always been the man's domain, like BBQs. But last year, I decided to test the feminine hand, encouraged by the desire for my own sweet and succulent fruits, but also with an appetite for the divine fragrance of perfumed tomato foliage (I even buy green vine tomato candles just to get me through winter).

My tomato-growing experience is limited. This year, I grew grafted, twin tomatoes from large plugs from Dobies, (£12.95 for a pack of three; www.dobies.co.uk). I did attempt to do a control with seed, but they, or perhaps more accurately, I, failed. I have since discovered they need a minimum temperature of 16-20°C to germinate and I think this may be where I went wrong. I have resolved to try again next year.

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The point of the grafted tomato is to put a good flavour on a really strong rootstock, so you enjoy both vigour and taste. In addition, my tomatoes were twinned, two different varieties; 'Dasher', a lovely mini red plum tomato and 'Santorange', a really sweet orange plum. Both fruits appear on one plant, which though a novelty, provides choice when it comes to colour and taste in a small garden, or in areas with limited sun for outdoor growing. While my crop has burgeoned, one plant is noticeably smaller and less productive than the others. It's in a smaller pot, so I must learn to give them ample room.

I was also surprised at how much support they needed and had to provide a sturdy metal obelisk to tie-in trusses of small but heavy ►

tomatoes as they rocket skyward. It's also good practice to remove some of the lower leaves as the growing season nears its end, concentrating on those concealing fruits, which require every ounce of sunshine to ripen. Doing this also increases air flow around the plants, keeping them healthier and free from disease.

Tomatoes can thrive outdoors, but give yourself the best chance with early ripening varieties like bush tomato 'Red Alert', planting in a gloriously sun-drenched position. And bush tomatoes are reasonably trouble-free, relieving you of the need to pinch out side shoots as you do with cordon types. Bushes remain controlled and also relatively compact, and reliably produce good crops. In June, transplant into pots or grow bags. There are also lots of great patio tomatoes, like 'Tumbling Tom', that are ideally suited to growing in hanging baskets. Hang the basket so children can help themselves to the tasty fruits.

Tomatoes offer plenty of health benefits as they are packed with Vitamins A and C. Tempt children to eat them by growing plenty of different shapes - plum, beefsteak, cherry and standard - and grow green, black, white and yellow varieties. Try 'Tumbling Tom Yellow'; sweet sun-coloured 'Ildi'; which offers up to 80 fruits per truss; or the dark-toned 'Black Cherry'. All require the same care, the most important being regular watering - make this part of your daily routine, choosing the morning as a preference.

Now is the best time to attend tomato events and taste the vast selection available, so you can plan to either buy plants or seeds early next summer. With such choice, don't rely on just one variety. Grow at least three, and enjoy a more varied crop. Be adventurous and you'll taste the difference.



ABOVE French marigolds entice aphids away. TOP RIGHT Scented green vine candle. RIGHT There's plenty of choice of colour, flavour and shape. OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT Sarah Wain is head gardener at West Dean Gardens. RIGHT Jacky makes fresh pesto.

Expert advice

SARAH WAIN FROM WEST DEAN GARDENS ON GROWING INDOOR TOMATOES:

● **Tomato seeds need heat** to germinate. Sow indoors in January if the greenhouse is heated, or from March otherwise. Sow one or two seeds per divided container to avoid pricking out, which you will need to do if you broadcast seed. Avoid over watering to prevent seedlings suffering from 'damping off'.

● **It is important to feed** and water seedlings regularly. At this stage, they need a high potash solution, like Vitax or Tomerite, to encourage flowers and subsequent fruits. Best to do this daily, or if time restricts, weekly. Water more frequently in hot spells and shade glasshouses if necessary.

● **Pot on and plant out** six to eight weeks after sowing.

● **Bushes and dwarf varieties** manage to 'stop' themselves, but because of generally wider girth, should be spaced 40cms apart. Good ventilation between plants helps reduce disease.

● **Space cordons 30cms apart**, using a fixed taut string or cane as a support. Pinch out stems and side shoots when five or six tomato trusses have formed, to stop wasting essential resources.

● **Indoor types** are prone to wilting diseases. Destroy affected plants.

● **Greenhouse pests** include aphids and white fly. Wash eggs off in the early stages, or resort to biological control, eliminating them with wasp *Encarsia formosa*.

● **Blight** is a fungal disease. To help prevent blight, observe recommended planting distances and always clear unwanted foliage.

Recipe 1
Tomato & Mozzarella Bites

Simple is often best when it comes to using fresh, seasonal ingredients. These canapies (right) are quick and easy to make and can be served with pesto sauce (see over for recipe.)

Serves 4-6 people

Ingredients:

- 1 tub of small mozzarella balls
- 12 cherry or baby plum tomatoes
- 12 basil leaves
- 12 cocktail sticks

● **Thread a tomato**, a mozzarella ball and a basil leaf onto each cocktail stick.

● **Sprinkle with salt** and pepper if desired, and serve as a classic Italian appetiser.



Events & where to buy

● **West Dean Gardens** Visit this spectacular productive garden to see their superb collection of indoor and outdoor tomatoes. Tel: +44 (0)1243 811301. www.westdean.org.uk

● **Annual Tomato Competition** at The Bell and Jorrocks, Frittenden, Kent TN17 2EJ. Tel: +44 (0)1580 852415. It usually takes place at the end of August or start of September. For details, go to www.thebellandjorrocks.co.uk

● **Seeds & Plants** The varieties mentioned in this feature are available from many seed suppliers, but in particular 'Tomatoberry' from www.mf-fothergills.co.uk, www.thompson-morgan.com and www.suttons.co.uk; 'Octavio' and 'Borsalina' from www.tozerseedsdirect.com; 'and Apero' from www.dobies.co.uk.

● **Grafted and twin tomato plants** are available from www.dobies.co.uk. There's a wide selection of seed, together with useful growing advice and tips, available from the National Vegetable Society. Visit www.nvsuk.org.uk



Recipe 2 Pesto sauce

Serves 4 people

Ingredients:

- 50g fresh basil leaves
- 125 ml extra virgin olive oil
- 10g fresh pine nuts
- 1 garlic clove
- 25g freshly grated Parmesan

● **Combine the basil leaves,** olive oil, pine nuts and garlic using either a pestle and mortar or, for quicker results, a hand blender. Mix until it reaches a delicious runny paste.

● **Add the Parmesan** just before dressing the tomatoes.



Recipe 3 Stuffed tomatoes

Big, pleated tomatoes look great topped and stuffed. You can make a filling from almost anything you have in the fridge.

Serves 4 people

Ingredients:

- 4 large tomatoes
- 1 courgette
- A handful of toasted pine nuts
- a handful of fresh herbs
- 25g freshly grated Parmesan
- a glug of olive oil
- salt and pepper

● **Scoop out the middle** of each tomato. Chop and put in a bowl.

● **Chop the courgette** and add to the tomato.

● **Add parmesan,** toasted pine nuts and some chopped herbs, seasoning to taste. Lightly mix and transfer to a pan, gently cooking over a low heat.

● **Fill the tomato hollows** with the mixture and place them in a muffin tray as they hold together better and don't fall over.

● **Pop the tomato** top back on, brush with oil and cook in a hot oven (180°C) for about 15 mins, or until wrinkled but still firm (you don't want them to fall apart on serving.)

