

Big yard not needed to grow tomatoes

Once you've tasted a truly wonderful home-grown tomato it's hard to go back to the "store-bought" variety.

One of our most popular vegetables, the tomato is easy to grow and even city-dwellers can raise hardy plants nowadays.

One mature plant bears a lot of tomatoes and the space needed to grow a few plants is minimal.

Some people buy young plants from a garden store for planting, while others start by planting seeds in containers.

While not difficult to raise, tomato plants need sunlight, a continuous supply of water and nutrients, a fairly warm temperature and protection from diseases and pests.

These requirements are constant throughout the plant's life, from seedling to mature plant.

PLAN TO sow seed roughly six-to-eight weeks before planting time in your region. Your initial supplies should include packets of seeds, potting mix and containers.

The most popular containers are those

made of peat, in the shape of pots, cubes and Jiffy-7 pellets, reinforced with plastic netting.

Many thrifty homeowners use common milk cartons, cut about three inches above the base. Flats, in wood or plastic, are also popular since they enable the home gardener to construct an easy, makeshift greenhouse with plastic bags and wire.

The experts who contributed to Ortho's book, "All About Tomatoes," advise you to fill the pots to about 1/4 inch from the top with a sterilized potting medium.

Plant one to three seeds 1/4- to 1/2-inch deep in the center of each pot. Plant at a uniform depth so seeds will germinate evenly and create uniform plants for transplanting.

REMEMBER THAT direct sunlight and high temperatures are especially important at this stage. Seeds will germinate quickly in a soil temperature of 75 to 85 degrees F.

Before the seeds sprout, you will not

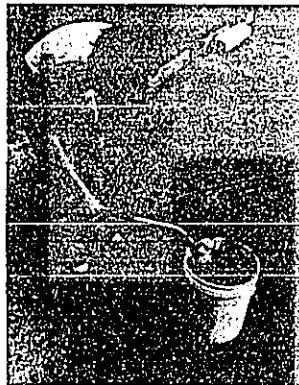
have to water them if you place them inside a sealed plastic bag.

When the seeds emerge, you should try to keep them in direct sunlight for 12 hours each day, although an artificial grow-light will suffice indoors. Seed germination will take roughly five to seven days.

Since millions of Americans are growing tomatoes in containers these days, seed-starting kits and miniature greenhouses are available in many garden centers.

Perhaps the easiest method of encouraging plant growth once the seedlings emerge is to raise the plants in peat pots, which can be placed on a plastic or wood tray and covered in a plastic bag with wire arches holding the plastic above the plants. This is an effective greenhouse and should be used until the plants have reached a height of four-to-six inches and are ready to transplant.

During this final stage, try to maintain a growing temperature of 70 to 75 degrees F. in the daytime and not below 60 degrees F. at night.



Getting a head start on the tomato-growing season is easy. Whether you use a plastic barrel or a milk carton, growing tomatoes in containers will be a success if you provide the young plants with plenty of sunlight and adequate moisture.



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