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Home > Advice > Growing tomatoes from seed

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growing tomatoes from seed

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A very wise man once told me that *you should plant out tomatoes when it's warm enough to eat outside*, and I've never forgotten this sage advice...

It's always a lovely moment when tomato-sowing time arrives: it means that spring is here, or is, at the very least, just around the corner. If you have space to grow tomatoes from seed under cover, sow them in early March, somewhere warm and cosy. You'll then have decent-sized tomato plants in flower, ready and waiting to go into greenhouse beds or growbags at the end of April, when very cold nights are unlikely and you can stop mollicoddling your nascent plants.

If you can only grow tomatoes from seed outside, wait another few weeks. You don't want to put your plants out when there is still a chance of night-time temperatures plummeting unexpectedly. Here in Sussex, that means the end of May. It's best to sow just seven or eight weeks before.

Sowing tomato seeds

I sow two tomato seeds into coir or [Jiffy pellets](#), and put them on to my heated polytunnel bed (although keeping them moist somewhere warm will do).

I cover the seeds and leave them for four or five days. Although it's unlikely that they will have germinated in that time, the first few might appear any day after that. As each one comes up, I move its pellet into full light. Once their roots have filled the pellet, I tear off the net and pot them on into a 9cm (3.5in) pot. The roots will fill that two or three weeks later and I then plant them in a two-litre pot, supporting them with canes and string stuck in at their side. Once they've filled that, they're ready for final planting.

Choosing your tomato seeds

If you have space for more than three or four plants, select several different varieties. Different colours, shapes and sizes make for more interesting salads, bruschettas and pasta sauces.

The sweetest and most magnificent tomato is [Tomato 'Sungold'](#). It has thin, orange-yellow skin and an incredibly sweet flavour. In taste trials, it always comes near the top. It's small-fruited, so ripens easily, and is hugely prolific.

I have space for good glades of these plants in the polytunnel, and don't bother with the usual technique of pinching out the tips as they grow. Once they reach the eaves, I allow two shoots to grow, turning one at right angles to the main stem and leaving one to grow straight up and over. By the early autumn, we'll have harvested all the fruit from the vines at a lower level, but with these two other shoots still cropping, we're picking 'Sungold' tomatoes up in the air until mid-November.

As a good contrast to the orangey colour, it's good to go for a bright-red cherry variety as well. These look good grown in alternate pots with 'Sungold' and look lovely together on the plate. I recommend : the excellent old stalwart [Tomato 'Gardener's Delight'](#).

There are a couple of other tomatoes definitely worth growing: [Tomato 'Noire de Crimée'](#) and [Tomato 'Costoluto Fiorentino'](#) both produce fruit the size of a small beefsteak tomato. 'Black Krim' (or 'Black Crimea') comes from Russia and is tolerant of our low temperatures and light levels. It has a delicious flavour and juicy firm flesh. 'Costoluto Fiorentino' is my number one choice for eating as it comes - or perhaps with a bit of



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Maldon salt, or splashed with basil oil and served with chunks of mozzarella.

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