

Tomatoes for the tropics



NOW IS THE TIME FOR GARDENERS IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA TO BE BUSY GROWING TOMATOES, WRITES PHIL DUDMAN.

If you live in the tropics or subtropics and have struggled to grow a decent tomato – not just those volunteer cherries that spring up from the compost, but the big, meaty fruits that fill the palm of your hand – then this is your moment.

In northern Australia, the cooler months are prime tomato time, and best of all, the growing is easy. While southern gardeners are packing up their tomato patches, northerners are just getting started.

Seasonal benefits

So why do tomatoes perform so well through winter in the top half of Australia?

Perfect temperatures: Tomatoes perform at their best when daytime temperatures sit between 21°C and 29°C. Through summer, temperatures regularly climb well above 30°C, which destroys pollen and reduces fruit set. In winter, things settle into a far more comfortable range, and plants respond beautifully.

Less disease: Summer humidity and frequent rain create the perfect environment for fungal

problems to take hold. In contrast, the drier winter air helps keep foliage dry, dramatically reducing the risk of disease and allowing plants to grow clean and strong. **Fewer pests:** Pests are less of an issue. Fruit fly and grub activity slows right down, meaning you're effectively growing your crop out of sync with peak pest pressure. (See 'Tropical pest management' for more.)

No frost: In most tropical and subtropical regions, winter is frost-free, so tomatoes can be grown outdoors without protection. (There are some exceptions, see 'Cool marginal subtropical areas'.) **Sunny days:** In winter, our tropical and subtropical regions typically experience clear, bright days, more than enough sunlight hours to support strong growth, flowering and fruit ripening.

Growing tips

Timing is important. The goal is to plant as the weather cools and humidity begins to drop, steering clear of the wet season. If late-season storms are still hanging



Winter is the perfect time to grow the bigger slicing tomato varieties in the tropics and subtropics.

PHOTO: ISTOCK/INSET: PHIL DUDMAN



PHOTOS: ISTOCK/MORTGAGE LIFTER; THE DIGGERS CLUB

around, which is common through April and May, start your seedlings in small pots and move them under cover during heavy downpours. Once conditions settle, they can safely go out into the garden.

Choose the sunniest spot in your patch where the drainage is perfect and avoid areas where tomatoes or related crops like eggplants, capsicum and potatoes have been grown in the past couple of years. This helps reduce the risk of soil-borne problems like nematodes and wilts. A week or two before planting, enrich the soil with compost and organic fertiliser and add a little sulphate of potash to promote consistent fruit development.

If space is limited, or you've had soil issues, containers are a great option. A few potted tomatoes on a sunny balcony or courtyard can produce an impressive crop. Choose a pot at least 40–50cm wide, fill it with a premium organic potting mix, and opt for compact, bush (determinate) varieties that require minimal training.

When planting, set seedlings a little deeper than they were in their pots – this encourages extra roots to form along the

Cool marginal subtropical areas

If you're in a cooler fringe zone, keep an eye out for the odd light frost and protect plants overnight when needed. If flowers aren't setting, temperatures may be too low for pollination. A simple greenhouse made from polypipe hoops covered with clear plastic can lift temperatures just enough to get fruit forming, or try growing plants against a north facing wall.

Far left: If you're short on space, grow compact varieties in containers.

Below left: Mortgage lifter.


Below right: Tigerella.



stem, allowing the plant to absorb more moisture and nutrients. Space plants 50–60cm apart, water them in well, and apply a layer of organic sugar cane or straw mulch to keep the soil evenly moist.

Tomatoes are vigorous growers, so give them support from the start. Vine type tomatoes (indeterminate) need at least two tall stakes or a trellis to manage their growth. Train them to one or two main stems and remove excess suckers to help prevent overcrowding. Compact bush types (determinate) typically do not require pruning or heavy training but will benefit from a small stake or wire cage to keep heavy branches off the ground.

Water regularly to maintain even soil moisture but try to keep the foliage dry. Feed monthly with an organic pellet fertiliser to support ongoing growth and fruiting. If using a liquid fertiliser, feed every fortnight.

When harvest time rolls around, pick fruit as they begin to show colour and allow them to ripen indoors in a warm spot. This will keep you one step ahead of birds and other hungry visitors. 



TOP TOMATOES FOR WINTER GROWING

Vine types

(indeterminate)

- Grosse Lisse
- Black Russian
- Mortgage Lifter
- Giant Tree
- Tigerella
- Stupice
- Black Cherry
- Ukraine Purple

Bush types

(determinate)

- Roma
- Siberian Cherry
- Tiny Tim
- Patio Prize
- Burnley Gem
- Kotlas



Tropical pest management

In the tropics, fruit fly can still be active through winter. The most effective solution is exclusion. Cover individual fruit trusses with pest exclusion bags, or net entire plants. If using pest exclusion netting, lift it every few days and gently flick the flower trusses to assist pollination.