



# Tony's Tomato Guide

20 honest methods for a cracking crop  
*seed to harvest, the old-fashioned way*

*Right, these are the methods my mam swore by, and the ones I've picked up over 30 years of growing on the allotment and in the polytunnel. Just solid, reliable stuff that actually works.*

## 01 The Buried Plant Pot Method

This is one my mam used – it's the old fashioned version of what they now sell as the halo method. Take a cheap plastic plant pot and knock the bottom out completely. Dig a hole, press the pot into the earth so just the rim sits above the soil surface.

Plant your tomato inside the pot – not beside it, in it. The roots push down through the open bottom into the proper soil below, going far deeper than normal. You get a much stronger root system as a result. When you water, pour straight into the pot – every drop goes directly to the roots, no waste. Same with feeding. My mam did this method for years and had brilliant crops every time.

## 02 Start Your Seeds Indoors

Sow your seeds indoors 6-8 weeks before the last frost – in the UK that's late February to mid-March. Use a seed tray or small modules filled with good quality seed compost. Push each seed about 5mm deep, cover lightly, water gently and cover with a propagator lid or cling film. They need warmth to germinate – ideally 18-21°C. A windowsill above a radiator is perfect. Once you see the first pair of proper true leaves (not the seed leaves, the next ones), it's time to pot them on into individual 9cm pots. Don't rush them outside – not even on a warm day. Tomatoes hate the cold and one late frost will wipe out weeks of work overnight. Wait until all risk of frost has passed, usually late May in the North.

## 03 Don't Overcrowd Your Seedlings

This is one people get wrong all the time. Give each seed a bit of space in the tray – they need light to grow strong and stocky. Overcrowded seedlings compete for light and stretch upwards trying to reach it, which gives you leggy, weak plants that struggle all season. As soon as they're big enough to handle – you want to be able to pick them up by a leaf, never by the stem – pot each one into its own module or 9cm pot. If two seeds have germinated together, sacrifice the weaker one. It feels brutal, but it's worth it. You want plants that are short and sturdy with a thick stem – not tall wobbly ones. Strong start = strong season.

## 04 Plant Deeply – Bury That Stem

This one genuinely surprises people but it makes a massive difference. When you transplant your tomatoes out, don't just pop them in at the same depth they were in the pot. Bury the plant right up to the bottom set of leaves – or even higher if you've got a leggy plant. Tomatoes are one of the few plants that grow roots all the way up their buried stem. The more stem you bury, the bigger the root system, and the more water and nutrients the plant can access. It also anchors the plant much better. If you've ended up with tall, leggy seedlings (happens to all of us), plant them at an angle so more stem is underground. They'll straighten up within a few days. Makes a proper difference, this one – do it every time.

## 05 Get the Ventilation Right

If you're growing under cover – polytunnel, greenhouse, cold frame – good airflow isn't optional, it's essential. Stagnant, warm, humid air is the number one cause of blight and fungal disease. Get the air moving every single day. Open your vents and doors first thing in the morning and leave them open during the day. A steady through-breeze is exactly what you want – it dries the leaves, reduces humidity, and actually helps with pollination too. On hot days, the more air the better. On cool days, at least a crack open. The only time you'd shut everything up is if temperatures are dropping below 10°C at night early in the season. Think of ventilation as free pest and disease prevention – it costs nothing and saves everything.

## 06 Take Off the Bottom Leaves

As your plants grow and start to produce their first trusses of fruit, strip off the lower leaves – anything below the first truss. Then as the season goes on, keep removing leaves below each truss as it sets. This does two important things: it dramatically improves airflow around the base of the plant (which keeps disease down), and it stops soil-borne diseases and pests splashing up onto the foliage when you water. Don't strip the whole plant – you need the upper leaves for photosynthesis. But keep that lower section completely clear. Aim for a clean, bare stem for the bottom third of the plant. It feels brutal the first time, but the plant thrives because of it. Leaf stripping and good ventilation work together – both cut humidity and disease. Do both.

## 07 Pinch Out Side Shoots

Cordon tomatoes (which is what most of us grow) need to be kept to one main stem. In the junction between the main stem and every leaf branch, you'll see a little shoot appear – that's a side shoot, and it needs to come out. Check your plants every week. When a side shoot is about 2-3cm long, pinch it out with your fingers or snap it off cleanly. If you leave them, they become full branches and your plant turns into a bush. It'll put all its energy into producing leaves and stems instead of fruit, and you'll end up with a massive plant and very few tomatoes. Snap them off when small – it's a two-minute job. Big side shoots left too long create larger wounds, so the sooner the better. One strong main stem, straight up, with beautiful trusses hanging off it. That's what you're after.

## 08 Water Consistently – Little and Often

Inconsistent watering causes more tomato problems than almost anything else. Never let compost dry out, and never drench a dry plant. That feast-and-famine approach causes blossom end rot and split skin – both happen when the plant takes up water too fast after a dry spell. Aim for regular, consistent moisture – damp but not waterlogged. In hot weather that means watering every single day. Same time each day if you can. The buried pot method (tip 1) helps enormously – water goes straight to the roots and the surface stays drier, which discourages slugs too. Pots and grow bags dry out much faster than open soil – check daily and you'll soon get a feel for when they need water.

## 09 Keep the Leaves Dry

Always water at the base of the plant, never overhead. Wet foliage in a warm, humid space is an open invitation for blight and fungal disease to take hold. This is especially important in polytunnels and greenhouses where the air isn't moving freely. Water in the morning rather than the evening if you can – that way any splashes have time to dry off before the cooler night air arrives. Wet leaves overnight is asking for trouble. This is another reason the buried pot method is so good – the water never touches the leaves at all. If you're watering with a can, get the spout right down low near the soil and pour slowly. It takes ten more seconds and makes a significant difference over the course of a season.

## 10 Feed Weekly Once Flowers Appear

Until your plants flower, they need a balanced feed to build strong roots, stems and leaves – something like a general-purpose liquid fertiliser every couple of weeks. But the moment you see the first yellow flowers open, switch to a high-potassium tomato feed. Potassium is what drives flower development, fruit set, and flavour. This is non-negotiable if you want a good crop. Feed every single week from first flower right through to the end of the season. A capful in the watering can – pour it straight into the buried pot if you're using that method. Don't skip weeks thinking it'll be fine. The plant is producing fruit and it's hungry. Tomato feed is cheap. Missing feeds is expensive in terms of the crop you lose. Get into the weekly routine and stick to it.

## 11 Support Your Plants Properly

A tomato plant laden with fruit is heavy – much heavier than you'd expect. A flimsy cane will snap or lean, and once a loaded plant topples or the stem snaps, that's a huge amount of crop lost. In the ground or raised beds, use a sturdy 1.8m cane or run string from the plant up to a horizontal bar or wire at roof height. In a polytunnel, overhead wires are ideal. Tie the main stem to the support every 20-30cm as it grows – use soft string or tomato clips and don't tie too tightly. Check the ties regularly as the plant grows – a tie that was loose in May can be cutting into the stem by August. Re-tie as needed. Also consider what's around the plant. If it's outdoors, it needs to be protected from wind which can rock it constantly and weaken the root system.

## 12 Control Humidity – Avoid Condensation

This one is particularly important for polytunnel and greenhouse growers. A hot, sweaty, condensation-heavy environment is the perfect breeding ground for grey mould (botrytis) and blight. The first thing to do every single morning – before you do anything else – is open the doors and vents. Let the overnight moisture and condensation out before the sun heats everything up. If you go in and the air is warm and steamy, that's dangerous. If you can see water droplets on the inside of the polytunnel, the humidity is too high. Steady airflow is the answer every time. In very wet spells, consider running a small fan on a timer overnight to keep air moving. It sounds over the top but it can genuinely save a crop during a damp August. Think of it as cheap insurance.

### 13 Help With Pollination

In a garden or allotment with plenty of bees and insects, pollination usually takes care of itself. But in a closed polytunnel or greenhouse, you might not be getting enough insect visitors – and without pollination, you get no fruit. The simplest fix: give your plants a gentle shake every day or two when the flowers are open. You'll see a little puff of pollen. This mimics what the wind and bees do. Alternatively, run a soft paintbrush or cotton bud over the open flowers, touching the centre of each one. Takes two minutes and dramatically improves fruit set. Leave tunnel doors open during the warmest part of the day to encourage whatever pollinators are around to come in. Planting a few companion flowers nearby (marigolds, borage) helps attract them too.

### 14 Top the Plant After 4-6 Trusses

Once your cordon tomato has set 4-6 clusters (trusses) of fruit, pinch out the growing tip at the very top of the main stem. Leave two leaves above the topmost truss and cut or snap off everything above that. This is called 'stopping' the plant, and it's important in the UK climate because we simply don't have enough reliable summer warmth to ripen more than 4-6 trusses. If you let it keep growing, it'll keep producing new trusses right up until the frost – but they'll never ripen. By stopping it, you redirect all the plant's energy from new growth into ripening the fruit it's already got. You'll get better, sweeter, earlier tomatoes as a result. Do it in late July or early August for most UK growers. Bush varieties don't need stopping – just cordons.

### 15 Mulch Around the Base

Once your plants are in the ground and the soil has warmed up (usually early June), put a good 5-7cm layer of mulch around the base – straw, garden compost, well-rotted manure, or even cardboard. Mulch does several brilliant things at once: it locks moisture into the soil so you water less often, it keeps soil temperature stable (roots hate dramatic temperature swings), it acts as a physical barrier stopping soil-borne disease splashing up onto lower leaves, and it suppresses weeds. Don't pile it up against the stem itself – keep a small gap. But cover the soil generously from about 10cm away from the stem outward. This is a low-effort, high-reward job that you do once at the start of the season and it pays dividends all summer.

## 16 Watch for Blight

Blight (*Phytophthora infestans*) is the biggest threat to tomatoes in the UK – the same disease that caused the Irish potato famine. It spreads fast and in warm, wet weather it can wipe out an entire crop in a matter of days. Know what to look for: dark brown patches on leaves with a pale yellow border, spreading fast. Fruit turns brown and rots quickly. In humid conditions you may see white fuzz on leaf undersides. Spot it – act immediately. Remove every affected leaf, stem and fruit. Bin it, don't compost. Improve ventilation and stop watering overhead. Prevention is everything: good airflow, dry leaves, not too dense, and keep potatoes well away – they carry blight too. In bad years a copper-based spray used preventatively can save your crop.

## 17 Try Companion Planting With Basil

There's good evidence that basil helps deter aphids and whitefly from tomatoes – both pests are serious problems that weaken plants and spread disease. Plant a few basil plants between and around your tomatoes. Some growers swear it also improves the flavour of nearby tomatoes. The science on that is less clear, but I'll tell you this – I've done it for years and my tomatoes taste incredible, so make of that what you will. Basil also loves the same conditions tomatoes do: warmth, shelter, regular watering. They're natural companions. Beyond basil, plant marigolds around the outside of your bed – they repel pests and attract pollinators. Borage is another cracker, and the flowers are dead pretty. And the best bit: fresh basil every time you pick tomatoes. Caprese salad, right there on the plot.

## 18 Don't Let Temperatures Drop at Night

Tomatoes are subtropical – they struggle below 10°C. Cold nights slow everything: growth, fruit set, ripening. A chilled plant sits doing very little even when days are warm. Through spring and early summer, close polytunnel or greenhouse doors every evening. Don't leave them open overnight – even a mild May evening can get much colder than you'd expect. Growing outdoors with a cold night forecast? Cover with horticultural fleece. One layer raises the temperature around the plant by 3-4°C – it makes a real difference. Once you're into July and nights are consistently above 12°C, you can relax. Patience in spring pays off in August.

## 19

**Use Good Quality Compost**

Don't skimp on the compost. It's the foundation everything else builds on, and if you get it wrong here, no amount of watering and feeding will fully compensate. Tomatoes are hungry, thirsty plants that need a rich, well-structured growing medium. A decent peat-free multipurpose compost mixed 50/50 with well-rotted garden compost or manure is ideal. It holds moisture but also drains freely – you want damp, not soggy. If you're growing in pots or grow bags, refresh the compost every single year. Old, compacted compost is depleted of nutrients and may carry disease from last season. Yes, it feels wasteful – but fresh compost each year makes a dramatic difference to your yields. For grow bags specifically: use two grow bags per plant if you can, giving the roots much more room to spread. Restricted roots mean restricted yields.

## 20

**Harvest Regularly to Keep Them Coming**

Once your tomatoes are ripe, pick them. Obvious – but lots of people leave them on the vine because they look nice, and it's counterproductive. Every ripe tomato still on the plant stops it putting energy into the ones behind it. Pick as soon as they're fully coloured and release with a gentle twist. The more you pick, the more the plant produces – a genuine virtuous cycle. Get out every two or three days at peak season and pick everything that's ready. Come September, bring in anything showing colour – it'll ripen on a sunny windowsill. Don't leave it to the frost. And when the glut hits – make sauce, roast them, freeze them. That's the whole point.

## A NOTE FOR NORTH AMERICAN GROWERS

Most of what's in this guide applies wherever you are in the world – tomatoes are tomatoes. But there are a few things worth knowing if you're growing in the US or Canada, where the climate, the terminology and the growing season can be a bit different.

### Frost Dates & Growing Zones

The UK has a fairly uniform climate – in the north we're talking last frost around late April to mid-May. In North America it varies enormously. Check your USDA Hardiness Zone: Zone 3-4 (Canada, northern US) – last frost May/June, short season, prioritise fast-maturing varieties. Zone 5-6 (Midwest, New England, Pacific Northwest) – last frost late April/May, similar to the UK. Zone 7-8 (Mid-Atlantic, Pacific coast) – last frost

### Temperature – a Quick Conversion

Throughout this guide temperatures are in Celsius. Here are the key ones: 10C = 50F (the minimum for tomatoes at night). 18-21C = 65-70F (ideal germination temperature). When I say 'a warm spell', I mean daytime highs of 70F+ (21C+). Southern US growers: in peak summer heat above 95F (35C), tomato flowers can drop without setting fruit. If that happens, shade cloth (30-40%) during the hottest part of the day helps enormously – something UK growers

### Terminology – What's What

A few words that mean different things on your side of the Atlantic: Allotment = community garden plot, or raised bed in your yard/backyard. Fertiliser = fertilizer. For tomatoes, look for products labelled 'tomato fertilizer' – high in potassium (K). Brands like Espoma Tomato-tone or Jobe's Organics work well. Compost = same thing. A good peat-free potting mix (like FoxFarm Ocean Forest) works similarly to what I use. Blight = late blight

### Varieties Worth Knowing

UK varieties like Gardener's Delight, Alicante and Moneymaker may be hard to find in North America. Great alternatives: for cherry tomatoes try Sungold, Sweet 100 or Black Cherry. For slicers: Celebrity (blight resistant – worth it in humid climates), Better Boy, Brandywine for flavour. For short seasons (Canada, Zone 3-5): look for 'days to maturity' of 60-70 days – Stupice, Siletz and Early Girl all perform well. If you're in a humid

---

— Tony

Good luck, enjoy every minute of it, and look after yourselves.

Stick to these and you'll be picking tomatoes all summer long.

*20 honest methods that actually work.*

**THAT'S THE LOT.**

Want to go further with your allotment?

*Taking On An Allotment: Where Do I Start?*

growmorecookmore.com | 9 modules | Only £27

