

Kitchen Plot

The Urban Garden Tomato Guide



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INTRODUCTION

If you grow nothing else in the urban garden, grow tomatoes! And maybe basil. Even if you only have a pot on the patio, as long as it gets sun there is a variety of tomato for you. They are easy to raise and taste far better than what's available in the supermarket.

Cooks find endless uses for tomatoes. Heirlooms were bred for a wide variety of specific flavors from salty to sweet. Some tomatoes work best for eating raw, others perform better in sauce. Choose your fruit size, from tiny bites of flavor to mammoth slicers. You even have decorative options because tomatoes ripen to almost any color, from green stripes to dark black-purple.

For these reasons, tomatoes are a great “gateway vegetable” for urban gardeners looking to expand from flowers or herbs into real produce. In fact, gardeners say tomatoes are the most commonly grown vegetable across the United States.

This guide will get you started.

We will help you figure out what options to prioritize when it comes to choosing a tomato for your urban garden. Our chart lists several different varieties for city spaces, and where you can find them. Our guide offers growing tips and seed-saving guidance especially for the urban garden. We point you toward resources for learning more, plus we added a few creative growing suggestions and some of Chef Iggy's favorite tomato recipes.

Let's get started!

Phaedra + Eric

KitchenPlot.com



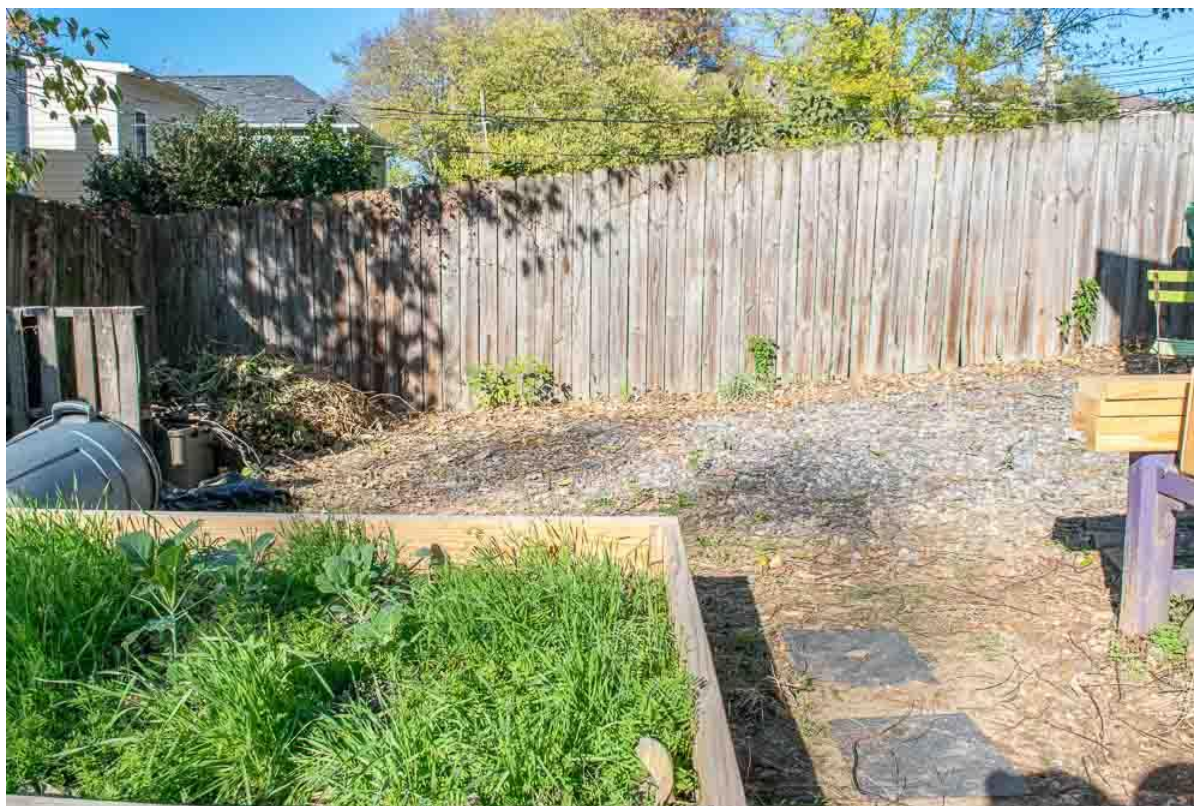
URBAN GARDEN LIMITATIONS

There are seemingly endless tomato varieties available, and new hybrids and heirlooms being developed and discovered every year. The choices can be overwhelming, and not every tomato is a happy urbanite. Let's get to know your space a bit first, to decide what tomato will be happy there.

Urban gardens range from sunny balconies and brick-lined back decks to alleyway planters and backyard raised beds. An urban garden can face some constraints, and the most critical ones for tomatoes are sun, water, and space.

SUN

Is your brick patio blasted by full sun all day? Or maybe a swath of sun crosses your balcony. Tomatoes need 6-8 hours of sun each day, so find a space where they'll fit. Hang out at home one day and take a picture each hour, then review to see where the sun hangs out the longest.



If it's winter, you'll want to predict how many hours of sun your city will get during the growing season. Visit www.usclimatedata.com for a list of total sun hours by month for your area. Then divide those by number of days to get the daily average. Compare that to the winter month you measured.

So, if your winter photos reveal a spot that's sunny for four hours, and the summer predictions increase your total sun by 2-3 hours, you've found a good home for your tomatoes.

To capture maximum sun, some gardening guides recommend planting tomatoes in pots, then moving them to "chase" the sun. That may make sense if you're home all day with nothing to do but move pots around, but we don't recommend it for real people with jobs and lives.

SPACE

Finding enough space is probably the biggest challenge for the urban tomato gardener. Maybe you only have a porch, or a front stoop. As long as you can fit a large-ish container in that space, you can fit in a tomato plant.

Dwarf tomatoes can grow in a two- to three-gallon pot. Miniatures can squeeze into a container 12 inches across. A normal-sized tomato needs a larger container, and don't even try to grow a big heirloom tomato plant in a container unless it's a large built-in raised bed. Most heirloom tomatoes will sprawl to over six feet tall with heavy branches, and will need strong support.

Tomatoes can be trained to grow vertical, without getting too bushy. Perhaps your urban space will let you grow vertically (download our Urban Garden Planner for more tips on carving out additional space). If so, you can trellis your tomato plant and prune it back so that it grows fairly flat against a wall support. In general, heirloom tomatoes grow better in giant circular tomato cages built from galvanized steel wire.

Know that tomatoes, and all vegetables, grown in containers will be a bit smaller than their garden counterparts. In general, the more dirt any container plant has, the happier it will be.

WATER

Containers dry out quickly so container-grown tomatoes will need a lot. Plan to water them every other day or every few days, depending on the pot size and stage of plant growth. If you don't have a water source nearby, or if you're away a lot, look at self-watering pots or drip irrigation. Although those systems are expensive, urban gardeners in tight spaces won't need very many.

You can also try adding an "olla" to your container. This is an ancient self-watering technique. An olla is a terra cotta water container that you bury near the plant. Fill it with water, cap it, and let it seep moisture slowly into the soil. You can buy a commercial olla, or (for a smaller pot) a terra cotta plant stake that holds an upside-down wine or soda bottle filled with water.



To make your own, caulk the hole closed in the bottom of an unsealed and uncoated terra cotta pot. Bury the pot next to the tomato, fill it with water, and cover it with a terra cotta saucer. This works better in a garden bed than in a pot because it takes up a fair amount of space.

Once you know your sun, space and water constraints, you've got enough information to make some plant choices. Now it's time to choose a tomato.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TOMATO FOR YOU

There are a bajillion tomato varieties available to fit your urban space, from tall and narrow to short and compact; from early to late season; including dwarf tomatoes developed especially for container growing. All this variety means that there is a perfect tomato out there for every urban space.

Of course the ultimate goal is to eat them, so factor flavor into your tomato choice. If you only plan to make sauce, there are varieties just for that. If you want more options, choose a general slicing tomato for eating and also cooking down for sauce.

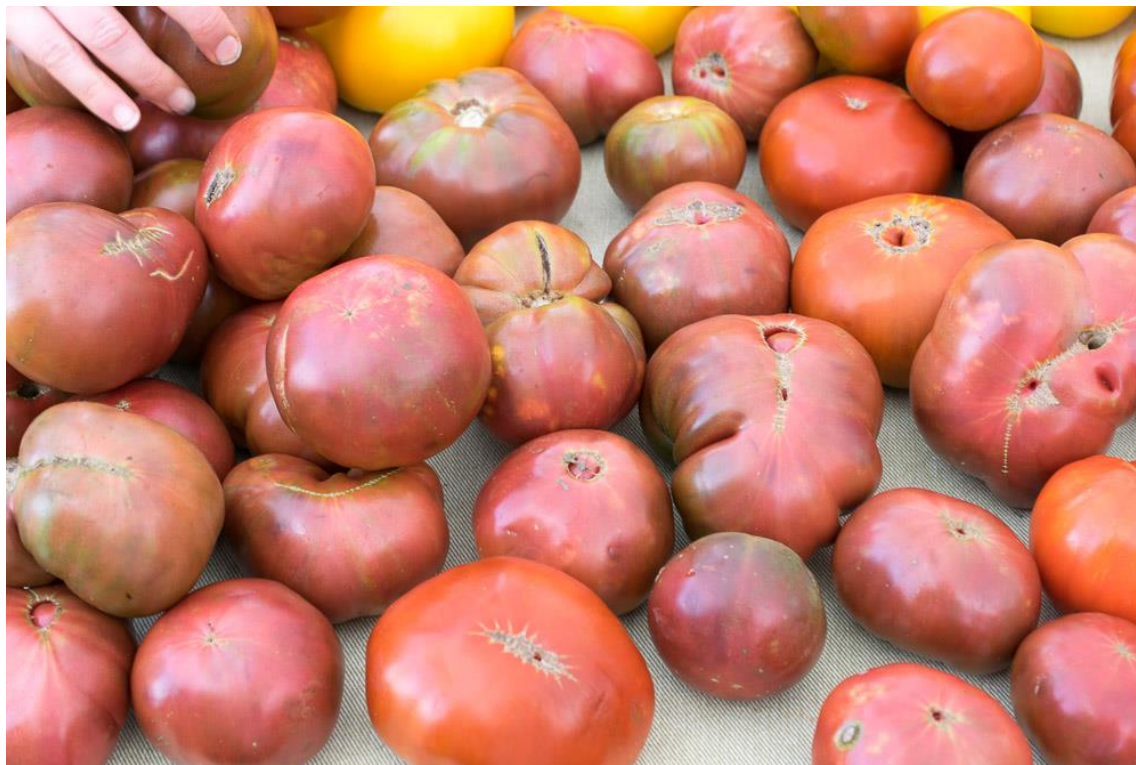
To choose the right plant, you need to know some of the shorthand for the various options. For example, if you want a compact plant for a tiny space then don't even look at the big, rangy heirlooms. But those will be your top choice if your biggest criteria is flavor and you've got a bit more of a yard.



Here are the key terms to know about tomato types:

HYBRID

A tomato variety is either a hybrid or an heirloom. Hybrids were created by cross-breeding different tomato varieties to create a plant with specific traits – like a certain color, or resistance to a disease. The flowers on hybrid tomatoes contain both male and female reproductive parts. They can pollinate themselves as they bloom and blow in the wind, shaking pollen around the flower.



Hybrid plants and fruits tend to be hardier than heirlooms, and some varieties set more fruit than heirlooms.

HEIRLOOM

An heirloom tomato has a loose definition. Generally, it's an older variety that has been grown for more than 50 years, handed down through generations of seed savers. Heirlooms are "open pollinated," which means the flowers on male plants need to meet up with the flowers on female plants. Bees, butterflies and humans help with pollination.

In general, gardeners turn to heirlooms for a wide variety of color and flavor.

DETERMINATE

Tomatoes grow in two ways; determinate and indeterminate. Determinates have a pre-determined shape in that they are bushy and compact, usually under four feet. Determinates grow and produce well in small spaces, perfect for urban gardening. They generally set more fruit than indeterminates.

The disadvantage to determinates is that they deliver all at once. They set all their fruit to ripen, and when that's done, the plant dies. Most, although not all, hybrids are determinates.

INDETERMINATE

Most heirloom tomatoes usually grow in tall, rangy, "indeterminate shapes," thus the name. They want to take over the urban garden if you don't fight back. These monsters never stop growing, but they also never stop producing tomatoes. Our back yard indeterminates give us tomatoes from June through November in zone 7a.

Indeterminates never stop growing, and must be supported. Imagine a six-foot-tall man with his arms outstretched – that's how big an indeterminate tomato can get during the season!

SEMI-DETERMINATE

As the name suggests, this is a cross between the two. They produce tomatoes all season like an indeterminate, but the plant tends to stay small and compact like a determinate. There aren't many of these varieties, but they are perfect for an urban gardener who wants garden-fresh tomatoes all summer from a smallish plant.

CHERRY OR GRAPE

This is a full-sized tomato plant (either determinate or indeterminate) that makes round cherry-sized or oval grape-sized tomatoes. These come in all colors, both hybrids and heirlooms. Many gardeners say that cherry tomato plants are hardier and more resistant to pests and mold than regular tomatoes. Cherry tomatoes aren't great for making sauces and salsas, but they are terrific fresh or roasted. Cherry tomatoes grow well in containers and one plant will yield more than two people can eat.

MINI

These tiny tomato varieties are suitable for pots and small containers. These aren't the most flavorful varieties, but great for using in salads and garnishes. A good choice for a tiny urban garden that needs a little variety and pop of color.

DWARF

A dwarf tomato is larger than a mini, smaller than a normal tomato plant. The plants are compact and happy in a large container. Fruits are cherry-tomato sized.

THE BEST URBAN TOMATO VARIETIES

As we've said, there's a tomato for every taste, every garden and every visual aesthetic. Now that you know the details about your urban garden, and the key characteristics of garden tomatoes, it's time to choose one! Are you searching for a hybrid cherry tomato? A flavorful heirloom? A variety of colors? Looking for especially good flavor?

This is not an exhaustive list, obviously. But the following chart ranking those features will help you find, at a glance, some urban-friendly options that work best for you.

Name	Growth Days	Type	Variety	Fruit Size	Flavor	Color
Amish Paste	85	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Plum	x	Red
Arkansas Traveler	85	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Full		Pink
Beefsteak varieties	85	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Beefsteak	x	Deep red
Black Cherry	75	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Cherry	x	purple
Brandywine varieties	85	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Beefsteak	x	Various
Cherokee Purple	85	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Full	x	purple
Costoluto Genovese	85	Heirloom	Determinate	Full	x	Red
Early Cascade	55-65	Hybrid	Indeterminate	Full		Red
Green Grape	70-80	Heirloom	Semi	Cherry	x	Green
Green Zebra	75	Heirloom	Semi	Full	x	Green stripe
Husky varieties	68-70	Hybrid	Both	Cherry		Various
Marmande	70	Heirloom	Semi	Full	x	Red
Micro Tom	85	Hybrid	Determinate	Dwarf		Red
Mortgage Lifter	80-85	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Beefsteak	x	Red
Nebraska Wedding	80-90	Heirloom	Determinate	Beefsteak	x	Orange
Pantano Romanesco	70-80	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Full	x	Red
Patio	70	Hybrid	Determinate	Cherry	x	Red
Pixie	52	Hybrid	Determinate	Cherry		Various
Roma	76	Heirloom	Determinate	Plum		Red
Rutgers	72-100	Hybrid	Determinate	Full		Red
San Marzano	80	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Plum	x	Red
Siberian	60-70	Heirloom	Determinate	Full		Red
Small Fry	65	Hybrid	Determinate	Cherry		Red
Snow White	74	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Cherry		Ivory
Sun Gold	57-65	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Cherry	x	Yellow
Tiny Tim	55	Hybrid	Determinate	Dwarf		Red
Yellow Pear	78	Heirloom	Indeterminate	Cherry	x	Yellow

For further research, talk to gardeners in your area or in a nearby garden or home improvement store. If you are lucky enough to have a seed catalog in your growing zone, give them a call to ask for advice (see our Resources section for a list of seed companies).



SMALL-SPACE GROWING TIPS FOR URBAN GARDENS

Starting tomatoes from sprouts is easier than seed, so if you can find the variety you want at your local garden center, fabulous! Sadly, few commercial garden centers carry seedlings for many of the most flavorful heirlooms or dwarf varieties. You can order a wide assortment of tempting varieties from your favorite seed catalog (see Resources).

If you plan to grow from seed, I recommend doing a little more research for details that we don't include here. For example, some gardeners swear by indoor grow lighting systems and heating pads – there are entire articles out there just on that topic. Growers debate about pot size, and whether to start the seeds indoors or outdoors in a cold frame or under cover. Know the options and make the best decision for your urban space.

In general, you'll want to start seeds 6-8 weeks before your area's last frost date. Usually the ground is too cold outdoors, so growers start them inside under grow lights or by a sunny window. You'll want to turn them daily so the seedlings don't bend toward the light.

You can start the seedlings in trays, or in small compostable peat pots, burying them ½" deep in soilless seed starting medium (sterilized and won't compact).

When you transplant the seedlings, trench the plants by burying them up to the first set of leaves in a shallow, sloping trench. This encourages the seedling to grow more roots, which is important for anchoring a tall plant in a container or small urban garden space.

KEY GROWING TIPS:

- Tomatoes are nutrient-greedy, so container-grown tomatoes usually need fertilizer as they grow. Use a tomato-specific fertilizer that's lower in nitrogen (which promotes leaf growth) and higher in phosphorus (for fruit).
- Containers heat up faster than in-ground beds, so tomato plants in containers produce earlier.



- If your hybrid tomato doesn't get a good breeze or attract pollinators (or it grows indoors), gently shake the blossoms daily to pollenate the plant.
- Gardeners go back and forth on whether or not to trim the "suckers" – the third branch that starts to grow at the fork of the main stem and larger branches. The suckers will bear fruit, but the more fruit on the plant the smaller the tomatoes will be. We recommend that urban gardeners pull off the suckers just to keep the plant a manageable size.
- You can pick tomatoes green (before a storm, a freeze or big rain) and they will ripen within a few days on the windowsill.
- Monitor water carefully because it is actually

possible to over-water. Too much water makes tomatoes split, not enough means they don't produce well.

When you bring home that baby plant, or transplant a little seedling, it's hard to imagine how massive the adult tomato will get. Indeterminates need support at least up to five feet, preferably six. And the support needs to be sturdy – a simple bamboo stake stuck in a pot will just topple over.

Does your urban space have a sunny wall? That's the perfect place to trellis tomatoes. To build a tomato trellis, fix latticework to the wall, or sink several bamboo poles in the pot and secure them to the wall at the top. As the tomatoes grow, tie the main stem to the support with yarn or twist ties (careful not to damage the stem). Prune back any heavy foliage, including the suckers, before the plant blooms. In fact, go ahead and prune the plant any way you like, especially for indeterminates. An urban gardener often needs to encourage plants to fit a small or awkward space.

SEED SAVING FOR NEXT YEAR

If you like the type of tomato you grew, and you don't want to pay for seeds next season, you can try seed saving. Here, the urban gardener is often at an advantage because of the limited space. If you only grow one variety of tomato, your seeds will produce that very same tomato next year.

Here's the tricky thing about tomato reproduction: Tomatoes will cross-pollinate, which means that the seeds from a cross will likely have various characteristics of both its parents. In larger gardens, with several tomato varieties, gardeners who want to save seeds must plant the different tomato varieties far apart to prevent cross pollination, or cover the blooms with bags or netting. But the urban gardener can just roll with a single variety from year to year.



One important note: Seed saving only works for heirloom varieties, not hybrids. Heirloom plants have “stabilized” over the years, meaning their seeds will produce the same type of plant. Hybrids won't. Hybrid seeds produce a plant that's an unpredictable mix of traits from its parent plants. You can try it, but you don't know what you'll get.

If you find an heirloom you like, save a few perfect ripe tomatoes from a strong, healthy plant that produced well.

SEED SAVING TIPS:

1. Wash the tomatoes well and cut them open. Squeeze the juice, pulp and seeds into a large mason jar or big plastic sealable container. Seal the container and set in a cool place (not more than 70 degrees) for three days to let the seeds ferment.
2. After three days, add two to three times more cool water than the seed volume and swish the mixture around. Bad seeds and pulp will float, so skim or pour that off the top. Repeat a few times until the healthy seeds at the bottom of the container are clean.
3. Rinse the seeds in a fine mesh strainer and drain. Spread on a paper towel or flat screen. Let the seeds dry in a well-ventilated area for 5-6 days, stirring occasionally to break up clumps.



Store fully dried seeds in a tightly sealed plastic bag in the refrigerator or other cool, dark and dry storage area (like a cellar). Saved seeds will be good to grow the following season. They should last several years, but each year the number of seeds that actually germinate will drop. But by that time you may be ready to try a new variety of tomato.

FIVE WAYS TO GET CREATIVE

Tomatoes are an attractive vegetable to grow, and delicious to eat, but they can do even more for your urban garden. Tomatoes are kind of a gateway plant, leading you into growing even more. Here are some directions you can go with your tiny tomato farm.

FIVE CREATIVE TAKES ON GROWING TOMATOES

1. Start a tiny theme garden. Plant basil, sage, marigolds or nasturtiums with tomatoes for a tasty Mediterranean themed container or mini-garden. The flowers are edible and will also attract pollinators. You can also pair tomatoes with other attractive vegetables. They grow well with cabbage, onions and peas. A tall tomato can help shade small lettuces in the heat of summer.
2. Make some tomato friends! Plan how to share your bumper crop of tomatoes, especially if you grow determinates that ripen all at once. Rather than just looking for places to drop them off, find a fellow gardener to swap with. If you plan far enough ahead you can actually co-garden. We have a friend who has planned in advance with another gardener. She grows certain vegetables and swaps with the friend who grows different ones.
3. Save the harvest in several ways. If you want to make sauce and freeze it, plan to grow sauce-specific tomato varieties. Those have fewer seeds, a higher flesh-to-skin ratio and they break down in cooking more easily. You can also dry tomatoes, either in a dehydrator or in the oven.

Store dried tomatoes in the freezer so they won't mold. When you rehydrate them, save the water for soups and other cooking. To can tomatoes you'll need some specialized equipment (jars, a rack, a deep pot and various tools for gripping the jars and lids), and directions on how to sterilize everything and heat the tomatoes to the proper temperature.

4. Swap seeds. If you start tomatoes from seed, give your extra seedlings as gifts. Or join a spring plant swap – contact a nearby botanical garden to see if they host one. If there isn't a plant swap in your area, organize it! Arrange a date for fellow gardeners to meet and exchange seedlings or seeds, and walk away with a variety of new plants for your urban garden.

5. Inspire others. Blog or post your tomato adventure on social media, and tag it with [#urbangarden](#). When you share tomatoes, also share the story of how you're growing them in a tiny urban space. Reach out to neighbors and others in your town to build an urban garden community. Show other urbanites that living in the city doesn't mean we can't grow our own food!



URBAN TOMATO RECIPES

Chef Iggy, aka Eric, cooked in professional kitchens for 26 years as both a cook and an executive chef. Now he does recipe development with fresh, seasonal Southern ingredients. Tomatoes are one of his favorites, although he also makes a mean bowl of grits.

CHERRY TOMATO BRUSCHETTA

Make this simple bruschetta for a quick lunch or a side dish for a summer soup. Serves 2.

INGREDIENTS

2 slices crusty sourdough bread

About a dozen cherry tomatoes

2 thick smears of creamy ricotta cheese (preferably homemade)

Fresh basil, salt, pepper and olive oil for garnish



INSTRUCTIONS

Slice tomatoes in half and toss with salt, pepper and olive oil. Lightly toast the bread on both sides, or brush with butter and grill on a griddle or charcoal grill. Spread with ricotta cheese and top with tomatoes. Garnish with fresh basil, a pinch of salt and a drizzle of olive oil. Serve immediately.

TOMATO SANDWICH



We eat this Southern classic all summer long for lunch or a light dinner. Duke's mayonnaise is a Southern institution, with a particularly tangy flavor that highlights the tomatoes.

Serves 2.

INGREDIENTS

4 slices soft white bread

Duke's mayonnaise

Two slicing tomatoes (we like Cherokee Purples)

Salt

INSTRUCTIONS

Slice the tomatoes and sprinkle both sides with salt (pepper is optional). Toast the bread lightly and spread insides thickly with mayonnaise. Stack one slice of bread with 2-3 layers of tomato and top with the other slice. Cut sandwich diagonally and serve with plenty of napkins.

TOMATO JAM

A great way to use any unripe, green tomatoes, this jam is a tangy sweet/sour flavor. Use it as a condiment on a cheese board, or a spread on a grilled cheese or deli sandwich. This will keep about three months refrigerated. Makes about 1 pint.

INGREDIENTS

3-4 medium unripe (green) tomatoes, roughly chopped

1 medium sweet onion, diced

1 clove garlic, minced

1 jalapeno, diced

¼ cup cider vinegar

¼ cup sugar

1 teaspoon salt

INSTRUCTIONS

Using in a nonreactive medium saucepan or high-sided skillet, sauté the onion and garlic over low heat until translucent. Add chopped tomato and cook briefly over medium heat. Add sugar, cider and salt, and cook mixture until soft and the sugar dissolved, stirring occasionally. Reduce slightly, then remove from heat. The natural pectin in the green tomatoes will make the jam thicken as it cools.

PICO DE GALLO

Throw this quick fresh salsa together for a snack with chips, and show off your garden bounty to visiting friends. Serves 4.

INGREDIENTS

4 medium tomatoes, diced

1 medium sweet onion, diced

1 green bell pepper, diced

1 jalapeno, diced

1 clove garlic, minced

Handful of fresh cilantro, roughly chopped

Juice from ½ lime

Salt to taste

INSTRUCTIONS

The dice for pico de gallo should be small, about ¼ inch. Mix all the vegetables together and pour lime juice over the blend. Sprinkle with salt to taste. Serve fresh - this salsa will only keep for about a week.

CREAM OF TOMATO AND FENNEL SOUP



You can make this hearty soup in summer or winter. In summer, use fresh tomato pulp. If you have a bumper crop, then freeze tomato pulp in plastic bags to use all winter long. In a pinch,

when you're craving tomato soup, you can also make this with canned or boxed crushed tomatoes. We like to serve it with grilled cheese on sourdough bread. Serves 8.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 large onion, diced
- 2 ribs celery, diced
- ½ bulb fennel, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced or crushed
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 6 cups crushed tomatoes (skinless, seedless, chopped)
- 1 cup dry white wine or vermouth
- 2 cups heavy cream

INSTRUCTIONS

In a large saucepan, sauté the onion, celery, fennel and garlic over medium heat until the vegetable soften and start to smell good. Add salt and pepper, tomato and wine. If the soup is too thick then add a little water. Simmer until the flavors come together, maybe half an hour. Taste and correct the seasoning. Garnish with a sprinkling of fennel tips and a drizzle of olive oil.

RESOURCES

Our guide is a starting point for your tomato-filled future. If you want to explore more tomato varieties, growing methods and seed sources, we've got you covered. Here are some of our favorite resources that we turn to frequently for more urban tomato (and other gardening) guidance.

BOOKS

Epic Tomatoes by Craig LeHoullier (Storey Publishing, 2014)

Small-Space Vegetable Gardens by Andrea Bellamy (Timber Press, 2014)

The Postage Stamp Vegetable Garden by Karen Newcomb (Ten Speed Press, 2015)

The Tomato Handbook (Firefly Books, 1997)

Vegetable Gardening in the Southeast by Ira Wallace (Timber Press, 2013)

Vertical Gardening by Derek Fell (Rodale, 2011)

SEED COMPANIES

We love these seed companies because they save and develop heirloom and earth-friendly seeds. Try to buy seeds from a supplier near you, as they'll be better acclimated to your climate and growing conditions.

[Annie's Heirloom Seeds](#) – Hudsonville, MI

[Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds](#) – Sonoma County, CA

[Johnny's Selected Seeds](#) – Winslow, ME

[Seed Savers Exchange](#) – Decorah, IA

[Seeds of Change](#) – Rancho Dominguez, CA

[Southern Exposure Seed Exchange](#) - Mineral, VA

[Territorial Seed Company](#) – Cottage Grove, OR



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