

Trellising & Pruning Tomatoes

Fresh tomatoes from the garden are a treat, but tomato plants need constant tending to keep the foliage healthy and produce high-quality fruits. Keep up with pruning and trellising from the time plants are small, and you'll avoid a tangled tomato jungle later in the season!

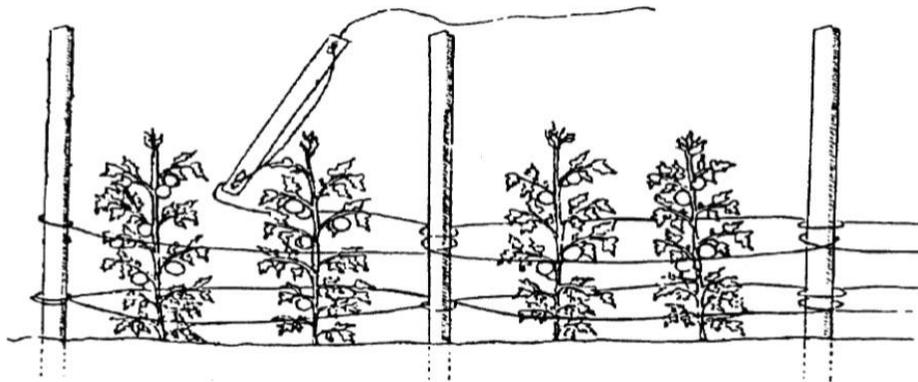
Why trellis & prune tomatoes?

- **Keep the foliage & fruits healthy & clean:** Tomato plants must be supported to keep foliage and fruits off the ground. This will result in healthier leaves, prevent rotting of fruit from soil-borne diseases, and make the fruits easier to harvest.
- **Increase airflow and prevent disease:** Foliage left on the ground or overly dense foliage will always be moist -- ideal conditions for plant diseases. Supporting the plants and removing some shoots will allow air to flow through the foliage, thus reducing disease and resulting in healthier, more productive plants.
- **Larger & better-quality fruit:** Pruning concentrates the plant's energy in a few shoots, so it can produce larger and better-quality fruit.



Trellising Tomatoes with a 'Stake and Weave' System:

A 'Stake-and-Weave' system is an excellent, low-cost option for keeping tomato plants upright. All you need are sturdy wood or metal stakes (5-7' tall) and strong twine. See next page for instructions.



Adding a second string in a 'Stake-and-Weave' system for tomatoes.

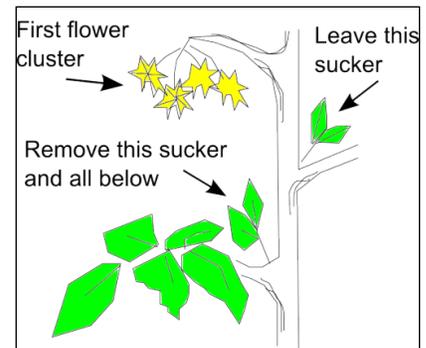
Figure credit: C. Sinclair, in Nitzsche et al. 2009 (Rutgers Cooperative Extension). Used with permission.

Trellising Tomatoes with a 'Stake and Weave' System, Continued:

- Transplant tomatoes in straight rows with 18" between plants. Drive stakes 1' deep on each end of a row of tomatoes and between every 2 - 3 plants. Use a mallet or post-pounder to sink the stakes deep enough.
- When the plants are 12-15" tall, tie your first string about 8-10" off the ground:
 - Secure the twine to a stake at the end of the row, then 'weave' it from one side of the plant row to the other between each plant, keeping the string tight enough to support the plants. As you go, place tomato leaves on top of the twine.
 - Loop the twine around the stake at the end of the row, then 'weave' back along the opposite side of each plant to form 'figure-eights.' Each plant should now have twine on either side of the stem, holding it upright. Secure the twine at the stake at the end of the row, back where you started.
- As the tomatoes grow, add strings to support the plants, each 6-8" above the last.
- Add strings only when plants are dry, to prevent the spread of bacterial diseases.

Pruning Tomatoes:

- Remove the following foliage:
 - Remove ALL diseased leaves. This will slow the spread of disease on the plant.
 - Remove 'sucker' plants selectively. These are shoots growing between the main stem and a leaf. Leave the first sucker below the first flower cluster, and remove all below that (see diagram at right). This will leave 2 main stems.
- Try to remove suckers when they are small (2-4 inches long). If they get large, use a garden knife or pruners to make a clean cut.



Pruning tomatoes.

Figure credit: J. McQueen, in Cox 2015 (eOrganic). Used with permission.

References:

- Cox, B. 2015. Training Systems and Pruning in Organic Tomato Production eXtension Organic Agriculture Community of Practice. Available at: <http://go.ncsu.edu/TrainingTomatoes>.
- Nitzsche, P. et al. 2009. The Stake and Weave Training System for the Home Garden. Rutgers Cooperative Extension Factsheet FS1102. Available at: <http://go.ncsu.edu/StakeandWeaveTomatoes>.

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