

How To Prune Tomatoes

The main goals of pruning are to direct the energy of growth to fruit production rather than unnecessary foliage growth, and to improve airflow through the plant. Pruning tomatoes can enhance flavor, improve yield, aid in disease resistance, and make it easier to harvest fruit (and hornworm caterpillars) in August!

Staking plants early allows the plant to grow into the staking system above and below the ground. Do so at planting time, or at least before too much root growth occurs. Staking plants later can damage roots and shock the plant. When building your staking system remember to envision a huge plant heavy with fruit and build the system tall and strong enough to support that late August tomato plant!

Indeterminate varieties (vining types) of tomatoes can be trellised and trained to produce fruit only off of the main stem. Prolific fruiteders, like cherry and grape tomatoes, rarely need pruning; give them a cage and let them go wild for the most fruit.

Determinate (bush types) varieties can be pruned to improve airflow.

Prune in the following steps throughout the season, starting early in June:

1. Start by identifying the main stem of the plant and follow up to the growth leader. The growth leader on the main stem will always have flowers and fruit before the growth leader on suckers, or off shoots from the main stem.
2. The next step is learning how to identify what are commonly called "suckers." The sucker is the junction between your stem branch and a leaf - it is always above a leaf. It juts out at about a 45 degree angle in this joint. You can begin **pruning your suckers** right away, and can continue throughout the entire season. To the left is a photo of a sucker.
3. **Prune any leaves touching the soil.** Many pests and diseases reside in the soil, and foliage in direct contact with soil is more prone to developing disease and pest issues. Many farmers know that even minimal soil contact with your leaves can be bad news, and you're better off pruning these leaves than leaving them as pathways for diseases and pests to infiltrate your plant. You can also use straw mulch between tomato plants to further deter any soil splash up during watering.
4. Also **remove some leaves in the interior** of the plant to allow more light and air flow into it. There is a fine line between taking off too much foliage and not enough. You want the tomato plant to be able to shade its fruit, otherwise a sun scald will form on it. Leave the leaf directly above the fruit to provide shade. Leaving the leaf directly below the fruit set is also important for tasty fruit as it is the leaf that provide sugars to the fruit.
5. Towards the end of your season (mid September in Vermont), you can start **topping off your plants if they become too large.** New vegetative growth at this time most likely will not bear fruit, so you're better off having your plant devote its energy to fruit production on existing flowers.



Tomato clips function best just below a leaf bract or fruit set. *Be careful not to damage the cell structure of the stem.*



How to Identify Suckers.

Pruning determinate (bush type) tomatoes:

Start by identifying and counting the main plant stems: **prune for 6 to 8 main stems** on a slicer or plum such as a Roma tomato and 12 to 14 stems on a cherry tomato plant. However, if it's late in the season and you have more stems than that firmly established, you can refrain from butchering your plant.