

# TOMATOES

## About Tomatoes

### History

Tomatoes probably were first cultivated in Peru by the Aztecs and Incas in the eighth century. The word "tomato" derives from the ancient Mayan word "xtomatl." In the 16th century, Spanish explorers introduced the tomato to Europe.

England and the United States were slower to accept the tomato. It wasn't until the mid-18th century that tomatoes were produced in parts of the southeast. Today, the United States is the second largest producer of tomatoes (behind China) at 12.5 million tons. Walt Disney World's Epcot Center houses the Guinness World Record tomato plant; it weighs 1,150 pounds and yields more than 32,000 tomatoes.

### The Plant

*There are more than 7,500 varieties of tomatoes.*

Tomatoes are classified as a fruit. However, for cooking and nutritional analysis, they are classified as a vegetable. Popular types include the cherry tomato, the roma or paste, the slicer, and the low-acid yellow and orange varieties. Tomatoes are good sources of vitamin C and beta carotene, which the body converts to vitamin A. They also contain lycopene which may help to prevent prostate cancer.

## How to Buy

Look for local tomatoes that are rich in color and slightly soft to the touch. Commercially produced tomatoes will be firmer, and the color may be more pinkish. Some stores carry vine-ripened tomatoes, which have a flavor closer to those produced locally but at a higher price.

## How to Prepare

*Tomatoes can be eaten raw, sautéed, grilled, baked, or used in sauces and soups.*

### Sidedish / Salad

Wash tomatoes right before using – there is no need to peel the skin. Many herbs and spices, such as basil, chervil, chives, dill, oregano, and thyme, complement tomatoes.

Tomatoes are usually served as a side dish or salad. They are delicious raw. Drizzle slices with olive oil or vinaigrette and sprinkle on your favorite herbs. Tomato wedges or cherry or grape tomatoes go great with vegetable dip.

### Grilled

Slice the tomato in half or in thick slices, brush with olive oil and your favorite herbs. Grill directly on the rack over medium heat for 2 to 3 minutes per side.

### Stuffed

Larger tomatoes are good stuffed. Cut them in half, brush with olive oil, and top with your favorite herbs, bread crumbs, or cheese. Place on a cookie sheet and bake until heated through.

## How to Store

Tomatoes should be held at room temperature for up to a week. Locally produced, still ripening tomatoes can be held longer. Underripe tomatoes will continue to ripen when stored out of the sun at 60 to 75 degrees.

Tomatoes lose flavor and quality when refrigerated.

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