



How-To: PRUNING TOMATOES

Pruning is an optional step in the tomato growing process. Here are some techniques and details on the pros and cons.



TOMATO PLANT WITH A SMALL SUCKER ANGLING TO THE RIGHT



TOMATO PLANT WITH A LARGER SUCKER DIVIDING THE SPACE BETWEEN STEM AND BRANCH

TO PRUNE OR NOT TO PRUNE

Pruning (or “suckering”) the tomato plant leads to:

- Fewer tomatoes
- Larger tomatoes
- A plant with less branching that:
 - Is easier to trellis
 - Is easier to harvest
 - May have less disease and pest problems, due to better air circulation

Allowing a plant to grow naturally, without pruning:

- Saves upfront time (harvesting may take longer)
- May result in more, smaller tomatoes
- May keep plants from contracting diseases through pruning sites

There are many ways to support (trellis) tomato plants as they grow (see Info Hub sheet *Trellising Crops*). A tomato that is pruned can be trellised almost any way. Tomatoes that are not pruned work best in large cages; due to their large number of branches, they can be unwieldy to trellis using other methods.

HOW TO PRUNE

Every tomato plant grows branches off a main stem. At the spot where the branch connects to the stem, another branch sprouts, bisecting the space between the main stem and branch. The new branch is sometimes called a “sucker.” Left to its own devices, the sucker will become a full-grown branch, with many leaves, flowers, and eventually tomatoes. This is why un-pruned tomato plants yield more fruits – they have more branches and flowers, which lead to more tomatoes. However, because the plant spends a lot of energy growing these extra branches, the fruits are smaller.

The best time to prune away suckers is when they are a few inches long, before they have started developing many leaves. Either pinch off the suckers by hand or use pruners to carefully clip them as far down as possible. To avoid spreading disease, some sources recommend dipping the pruners in rubbing alcohol between each cut, to sterilize the blades.

If the suckers have been growing for a long time, it can be hard to distinguish them from other branches. If the plant has grown so much that you are uncertain whether a branch is a sucker or not, the best plan is to leave it alone. Pruning too heavily can be stressful for the plant and counterproductive in terms of tomato yield.



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On a final note, as a tomato plant grows, its main stem eventually branches into a “Y.” Please see examples in the photos. Be careful not mistake half of this Y for a sucker, and prune it, as this can stunt the plant! You can determine that it is the main stem and not a sucker by the lack of a branch on the underside (there may still be a leaf).



EXAMPLE 1: TOMATO PLANT BRANCHING INTO A “Y” – DO NOT PRUNE THIS AREA



EXAMPLE 2: TOMATO PLANT BRANCHING INTO A “Y” – DO NOT PRUNE THIS AREA