



Gardening Tips and Techniques: Trellising Tomatoes

Hopefully we're past the coldest nights of the spring, and our warm-season crops like tomatoes have balmy climes ahead! With the warm days forecast for the end of the week, it seems like the weather will be right for some good growth! This week we'd like to describe methods for supporting tomato plants as they grow. But before we delve into the various trellising techniques, it's helpful to note that each tomato variety grows in one of two distinct patterns.

Tomatoes are categorized as either *determinate* or *indeterminate*. Determinate types grow in a bush-type shape. They stop growing as they set flowers, and their fruits ripen around the same time. Indeterminate tomato plants grow with more of a vining habit, and continue growing throughout the season. Their fruits ripen bit by bit. These plants continue to flower and set fruits until the end of the season. Both types of tomatoes can benefit from trellising but indeterminate varieties can get out of hand quickly if they are not trellised. Pruning can help keep them tidy, and results in fewer, larger fruits. If you choose not to stake your determinate varieties, it's especially important to place mulch beneath the plant to keep soil-borne diseases at bay.

Trellising your tomatoes is beneficial in a lot of different ways! Holding plants off the ground creates space in the garden (since the plants grow *up*, not *out*), helps protect the plants from soil-borne disease, and makes harvesting a lot easier. And if you're able to take some time to be creative and resourceful, trellises don't need to cost a lot of money. Here are some traditional and more unique options:

- **Purchased tomato cages:** These work best with determinate varieties.
- **Handmade tomato cages:** These can be created from wire fencing or concrete reinforcement, bent around wooden or metal stakes. Choose 5 or 6' fencing for indeterminate varieties, and make sure that the holes are large enough to reach through to harvest.
- **Stakes:** 6' metal u- or t-posts, or 2x2" wooden stakes can be set into the ground next to each tomato. Sink the stakes in the ground early on, to avoid damaging the tomato plant's roots. Tie the central stem of the tomato to the stake with strips of soft rags or old stockings.
- **String attached to a structure:** If you've got (or can build!) a structure with a strong beam running parallel to the ground (like a swingset that's no longer in use), place the structure above the tomatoes and tie a string above each plant. Tie the string to a small wooden stake at the base of each tomato plant. As the plant grows, wind it around the string.
- **Got a fence?:** Chain link fencing can make a great trellis as it's super sturdy. Use soft rag strips or old stockings to attach the central stem and branches to the fence.
- **Basket weave:** In a row of tomatoes, place a 5-6', 2x2" wooden stake in the ground after every 2 tomato plants. Place metal stakes at each end of the row. Use twine to weave around the stakes and tomato plants in a basket weave pattern. Add another layer of twine after each foot of growth.
- **Found objects:** anything with a little height and stability can make a fine tomato trellis! Get creative!



Tomato cages in the field at Braddock Farms.



Close-up of a tomato cage, made from concrete reinforcement, at Braddock Farms.