

Garden Tips & Techniques

TO PRUNE OR NOT TO PRUNE, that is the question...that we hear a lot of gardeners asking about their tomato plants! Everyone's gardening situation is different, so here's the quick & dirty on pruning. We'll let you draw your own conclusions!

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 lots of ways to trellis (provide a structure that holds the plant up) a tomato plant. We'll address trellising techniques next week in *The Urban Harvester*. For now, we'll just say that a tomato that is pruned can be trellised almost any way. On our various food-growing sites, we've found that tomatoes that aren't pruned grow best in large cages; since they've got so many branches they can be unwieldy to trellis other ways.

HOW TO PRUNE A TOMATO PLANT

Every tomato plant grows branches off a main stem. Right where the branch connects to the stem, another branch sprouts, bisecting the space between the main stem and branch. This new branch grows at about a 45 degree angle from the stem and existing branch. The new branch is sometimes called a "sucker."

Left to its own devices, the sucker will become a full-grown branch, with lots of 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 those extra branches, the fruits are smaller.

The best time to prune the suckers is when they are a few inches long, before they have started developing many leaves. On our sites, we usually do this by pinching off the suckers with our fingers, but you could also use a small hand pruner. If you are concerned about spreading disease from plant to plant, dip your 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 you can't tell if a branch is a sucker or not, the best plan is to leave it alone.

Pruning too heavily after a plant has done a lot of growing can be stressful for the plant and counterproductive in terms of tomato yield.

On a final note, as a tomato plant grows, its main stem eventually branches into a “Y.” We’ve got some examples of this in the photos below. Be careful not mistake half of this Y for a sucker, and prune it, as this can stunt the plant! You can determine it’s the main stem and not a sucker, because there is no branch *right* next to this growth.

Pictures:

Large tomato sucker:



Tomato branching:



Small tomato Sucker:



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