

March

Growing Guide with She Grows Veg



March is the true beginning of tomato season in the greenhouse. Light levels are increasing, days are stretching out and, with a little added warmth, it's the perfect moment to sow heirloom tomatoes for a flavour-packed summer ahead. Starting in March gives plants a strong, steady run-up to fruiting time, especially under glass where conditions are more controlled and forgiving. If you've been dreaming of jewel-like fruits in every colour imaginable, now is the moment to begin.



Why Grow Heirloom Tomatoes?

Heirloom tomatoes aren't just plants, they're culinary treasures with character and history. These open-pollinated varieties come in a dazzling array of colours, shapes and flavours that F1 hybrids simply can't match.

While hybrid varieties have been developed for performance, heirloom varieties have been saved and handed down for generations purely because they taste incredible, and when you are growing in your garden, flavour is king! Their nuanced tastes, from rich and sweet to tangy and complex, make them a joy to grow and eat.

In a greenhouse, heirlooms truly shine. The protected environment reduces stress, encourages reliable fruit set and allows you to extend the season at both ends. Many heirloom varieties are indeterminate (cordon types), meaning they'll keep growing and cropping well into autumn if properly managed.

The Case for Storage Tomatoes

This year, I'd strongly encourage you to include at least one storage tomato variety in your greenhouse plan. Storage tomatoes (sometimes called "long-keepers") are traditional varieties bred not just for flavour but for longevity after harvest. Unlike conventional tomatoes that must be eaten within days of ripening, storage tomatoes can be harvested mature but unripe and stored for months, gradually ripening long after the main season ends.

This means you can actually be eating homegrown tomatoes on Xmas day! Many storage varieties have slightly thicker skins and firmer flesh. They're harvested before full ripeness and kept in a single layer in trays,

Storage tomatoes benefit from a slightly different approach to traditional tomatoes.

Sow later: You're aiming for these tomatoes to be full sized but not ripe by the end of the season so a later sowing from end of March into April can help make get that timing right.

Slightly leaner feeding and watering: Avoid excessive nitrogen; too much lush growth reduces keeping quality. Reduced watering once the fruit is swelling will help to thicken skins prolonging storage time.



Full ripening off the vine: Allow fruits to reach mature size before picking, but harvest before they ripen. Harvest full trusses and string together in large bunches ready to gradually ripen. They are best stored somewhere cool and dry but frost-free.

Greenhouse Prep: Warmth, Light & Soil

Before sowing seeds, give your greenhouse a spring clean. Remove any spent winter crops, sweep floors, clean staging and clear old pots. Its also a good idea to have a clean down with some good old soap and water to remove any sneaky overwintering pests or mildews that are lying in wait for the new season. Check that ventilation works smoothly - vents open on warm days to stave off overheating and close at night against cold snaps.

Tomatoes thrive in warmth and light. Aim for an even daytime temperature of 18–24°C, with minimum nights no colder than 12–15°C if possible. Though they won't be killed off until temperatures reach freezing, lower than optimum temps can slow or stall growth. In the unpredictable UK spring, heaters or heat mats can make all the difference for consistent germination and early growth. Good light is essential too keep glass clean and consider supplemental LED grow lights if natural light is still weak early in the month.



Sowing Heirloom Tomato Seeds

Sow seeds 6–10 mm deep in a fine, free-draining peat-free compost. A fine structured, moist but not soggy medium gives seeds the best start, just avoid starting in pure coir as tomato seedlings hate this. Water gently and cover with a propagator lid or clear cover until germination, which usually takes 7–14 days at 18–21°C.

As soon as seedlings emerge, remove any cover and move them into maximum light. Leggy seedlings are usually caused by insufficient light or too much heat so aim for bright days and slightly cooler nights once they're up and continue to supplement light if needed.

Don't worry, leggy tomatoes can be salvaged at potting on stage, bury most of the stem and they will magically grow new roots out of the buried stem, fixing the plant and increasing the size of the root system.

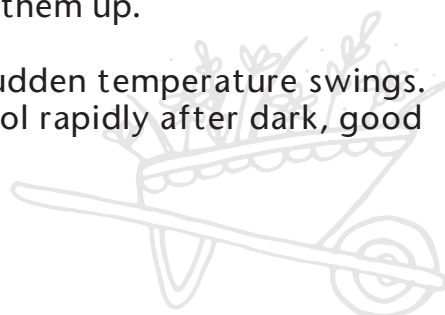


Caring For Seedlings

Once your seedlings have emerged, it's all about light, airflow and steady growth. Rotate trays regularly for even light exposure, and avoid placing them too close together which can encourage fungal problems.

As soon as the first true leaves appear (beyond the tiny seed leaves), it's time to prick out into small pots of good quality compost. Handle seedlings with care to protect their tender stems and growth tips. Continue to grow them on in a bright, warm spot and gradually reduce humidity to harden them up.

While heirlooms enjoy warmth, be vigilant against sudden temperature swings. Greenhouse days can heat quickly in sunshine and cool rapidly after dark, good ventilation and even heat distribution are key.



Keep an eye on the bases of pots, when roots start to appear out of the drainage holes in the bottom, consider potting on again into larger containers if needed. Larger pots give roots room to develop and make plants more robust before they take up their final positions.

This also helps with nutrient uptake once flowering begins. Once seedling reach about 20cm tall, it is a good idea to start feeding with a weak, quarter strength dose of organic liquid feed, veganic tomato feed or comfrey tea is a great call to build vigour without overloading.



Planting into the greenhouse

By late April or early May (depending on your location and overnight temperatures) your young plants should be ready for their final greenhouse positions. Space plants 40–50 cm (16–20 in) apart to ensure good airflow and easy access for training. Tomatoes love depth, so plant slightly deeper than they were in pots, they'll root along the buried stem and become sturdier.

In the greenhouse, indeterminate heirloom varieties will keep growing and producing fruit all season. Give each plant a robust support: strong canes, trellis or string tied to the greenhouse roof works well.



Training, Pruning & Ventilation

Regular attention pays dividends with heirlooms. As plants grow, pinching out side shoots (the small shoots emerging in leaf axils) focuses energy into the main stems and fruiting trusses. Removing lower leaves improves airflow, helping to reduce disease pressure in the humid greenhouse environment. Ventilation is vital on sunny spring days. Open vents early to moderate temperatures and reduce humidity that can encourage blight or fungal infections. Close up at night if frost threatens.

Watering & Feeding for Success

Tomatoes like consistent moisture. In fluctuating spring conditions, water at the base to keep foliage dry, and feed with a potassium-rich liquid fertiliser once first flowers appear. Too much nitrogen encourages lush leaves at the expense of fruit, so it pays to pick the right feed for the job.

Looking Ahead to Harvest

With careful attention through April and May, your heirloom tomatoes should flower and set fruit by early summer. In a greenhouse, fruits may begin ripening as early as July, extending long into autumn if conditions remain favourable. By sowing in March, you're setting up for months of extraordinary flavour. Heirloom tomatoes reward attentiveness, and the greenhouse provides the stable environment they love. Add a storage variety to your plan this year and you'll not only feast through summer but enjoy homegrown tomatoes long after the last warm days have passed.

Top Varieties to Try

Ananas Noir - One of the most beautiful tomatoes, this variety produces big green fruit with a rosy glow. The real treat comes when sliced to reveal a tie dye effect of green, yellow and red. Absolutely delicious; they are sweet and smoky with a slight acidity that balances beautifully.

Green Doctors - My favourite cherry tomato. Despite its lime green colour, it is in fact one of the sweetest we've tried and the cherry sized fruit is produced in huge abundance. Fruit takes on a slight yellow tint so it's easy to see when it's ripe.

True Black Brandywine - A beguiling take on the classic heirloom beefsteak, this tomato's name comes from its rich deepest red skin and flesh. Producing large fruits full of sweet, earthy flavour with an impressive yield.





Giallorosso di Crispiano Storage Tomato - This very rare long-keeping southern Italian heirloom originates from the town of Crispiano, in Puglia, Italy and is thought to date back as far as the 17th century. Bred for storage, with glossy yellowy red fruit that hold their flavour and texture well into winter. Can last 6 months or more when stored correctly.

Hanging Prince Storage Tomato (Principe Borghese) - This lovely plum shaped fruit is of particular interest because of its storing ability. As they age they naturally dehydrate leaving you with a crop of dried tomatoes akin to 'sun dried' if left long enough.

About the author

Lucy Hutchings is a vegetable grower and founder of She Grows Veg, known for her passion for unusual and heirloom vegetable varieties. Through her popular Instagram account, @shegrowsveg, she has spent the past seven years inspiring gardeners to grow colourful, characterful crops at home.

In November 2023, she co-founded She Grows Veg, an heirloom seed company, with business partner Kate Cotterill. Together they source and share rare and fascinating vegetable varieties from around the world, helping bring greater diversity and excitement to kitchen gardens across the UK.

Where to find out more

Instagram: [@shegrowsveg](https://www.instagram.com/shegrowsveg)
www.shegrowsveg.com

A gift from Lucy

Lucy has kindly offered Alitex readers 15% off their first order from the She Grows Veg seed ranges. Simply use code ALITEX15 at checkout when ordering via shegrowsveg.com to redeem your discount.

