

A STEADING CODEX FIELD GUIDE

The First 90 Days of Tomatoes

From a seed on the windowsill to the first ripe fruit — the season, in order.

Tomatoes aren't hard; they're just a sequence, and most failures are a step done at the wrong time. Here's the whole run — sow to harvest — the way a working grower keeps it. Read it once, then let the log at the back do the remembering.

SC The Steading Codex

Before you sow

Start at the end: your last frost date decides everything else.

Find your average last spring frost, then count back **6–8 weeks** — that's your sow date indoors. Sow earlier and you'll be nursing leggy, root-bound plants for weeks with nowhere to put them.

Pick a variety for your space, not the catalogue photo. **Determinate** types stay compact and set most of their fruit at once — good for containers and canning. **Indeterminate** types climb and fruit until frost — more space, more staking, a longer harvest.

You'll need

- A warm spot (70–80°F) for germination — the top of the fridge works
- Real light the moment they sprout: a bright south window is marginal, a shop light 2–3 inches above the seedlings is better
- Small pots, a light seed mix, and a fan or a daily hand-brush across the tops

Germination & the first true leaves

Warmth to sprout, then light — fast, before they stretch.

Sow $\frac{1}{4}$ **inch deep**, keep the mix damp and warm, and most varieties are up in 5–10 days. The instant you see green, they need bright light — a windowsill seedling reaching and pale is already behind.

The first pair of leaves are seed leaves; the next are the true leaves. Once those show, thin to one strong seedling per cell and start a weak feed. Brush your hand across the tops once a day, or run a fan — the little stress builds thick, stocky stems that won't flop.

Pot up to a bigger container before they get root-bound. Bury them a little deeper each time: tomatoes root along a buried stem, so a deeper plant is a stronger plant.

Hardening off & transplant

Don't move a coddled seedling straight into the wind.

A week to ten days before transplanting, harden off: an hour outside in shade on day one, a little more sun and time each day, back in at night. Skip this and the first real sun scorches the leaves white.

Transplant only once nights hold above ~50°F. Plant **deep** — up to the first set of leaves, buried stem and all — and give each plant room: 18–24 inches for determinates, 24–36 for indeterminates. In a container, one plant per 5-gallon pot, minimum.

Put the cage or stake in **now**, at transplant. Add it later and you'll drive it through the roots and fight the plant all season.

Growth & training

Water like you mean it; feed steadily; keep it off the ground.

Water **deep and even**. Tomatoes hate swings — bone-dry then flooded is what causes blossom-end rot (that sunken brown patch on the bottom of the fruit) and cracking. Mulch to hold moisture steady. Aim for the roots, not the leaves.

Feed every week or two once fruit sets — a balanced or slightly higher-potassium feed. Too much nitrogen buys you a jungle of leaves and few tomatoes.

For indeterminate plants, pinch out the **suckers** — the shoots in the crook between the main stem and a branch — to keep one or two leaders and better airflow. Leave determinates alone; pruning them just costs you fruit.

Yellowing lower leaves late in the season are usually just age. Spotting that climbs from the bottom is worth a closer look — remove affected leaves, water at the base, keep the plant dry overnight.

Flowers to fruit

Pollination, the first set, and the usual mid-summer troubles.

Tomatoes self-pollinate, but they need movement — wind, or a bee, or you giving the stems or the cage a gentle shake mid-morning on a dry day. Indoors or on a still balcony, that shake is the whole job.

If flowers open and drop without setting fruit, it's usually **heat** (above ~90°F days / ~75°F nights) or a dry spell — both pass. Fruit that cracks after a rain is a water swing; steady watering and mulch fix it.

Watch for the tomato hornworm — a big green caterpillar that strips leaves overnight. Hand-pick them (look for the dark droppings below the damage). One evening's patrol usually clears them.

Picking, and saving your own seed

Pick at the turn, ripen on the counter, keep the best for next year.

You don't have to leave fruit on the vine to ripen. Once a tomato reaches the **breaker stage** — the first blush of colour at the blossom end — it will finish beautifully on the counter, and picking it takes the load off the plant. Never refrigerate a tomato you want to taste of anything.

To save seed from an open-pollinated (not hybrid) variety: scoop the seeds and their gel into a jar with a splash of water, let it ferment on the counter 2–3 days until a skin forms, then rinse the clean seed and dry it flat. That short ferment removes the coating that stops seeds sprouting.

Write down which plant it came from and what you thought of it. That note is next year's variety decision, already made.

Tomato season log

One dated line per check — the record the plant can't keep for you.

DATE	PLANT / VARIETY	STAGE	HEIGHT · FLOWERS · FRUIT	WATER / FEED	ACTION

YOU'VE GOT THE GUIDE

Now keep the record. The full ledger is *Balcony Bloom*.

The log at the back is one sheet from Balcony Bloom — a 100+ page working field journal for the whole season, not just this guide: structured logs, reference decks, and season reviews. If this helped, that's where the rest of it lives.

See the full journal → thesteadingcodex.com/volumes/balcony-bloom
Or the whole system → thesteadingcodex.com/collection