

Wenke Wisdom

Upside-down Tomato Plants

At first glance, this might look like an unusual way to grow tomatoes. However, there are several advantages to hanging tomatoes in buckets. First, the air can circulate better so the plants have almost no disease problems. Second, the fruit doesn't rot as quickly as that on the ground. Finally, some critters that eat tomatoes have trouble getting to the ripening fruit.

To make the upside-down containers, use a 5-gallon bucket with a tight-fitting lid. You can find these many places, such as paint or hardware stores.

Scrub each bucket with soapy water and make sure that the handle is attached securely. Cut a 2" to 3" diameter hole in the center of the lid and one in the bottom of the bucket. To make the holes, use a drill with a hole saw bit (an attachment for cutting a door to install a doorknob).

With the bucket standing upright and the lid off, cover the hole in the bottom with a coffee filter or scrap of fabric. That way the soil won't fall out when you turn the bucket over. Fill the bucket full of a lightweight potting mix, shaking it to settle the soil.

Before putting the lid back on, lay another coffee filter over the soil where the hole will be. Next, put the lid on and turn the bucket upside down.

Cut a slit through the filter in the hole and plant a tomato seedling. To give the tomato a fast start, strip off the lower leaves and plant the seedling deeply, so roots can form along the stem. Place the planted bucket in a sunny location and keep it well watered for the next few weeks.

When the plant is about a foot tall, it is ready to hang. The bucket needs a solid support to hold the weight. A clothesline post is ideal. If you hang the basket from a building, make sure it won't bang into a window or the siding on a windy day.

This part is easier with two people – one to lift and hold the bucket and one to fasten the chain. Drape a chain over the clothesline post while a friend lifts the bucket. Pull the chain through the handle of the bucket and fasten the ends together. You can buy chain loops made specifically for fastening or use a piece of heavy wire and twist it to hold the chain together. Either way, you can raise and lower the height to harvest the tomatoes.