

Your biggest harvest starts here

For a bumper tomato harvest you need well-fed plants. **Sue Fisher** puts the leading fertiliser brands through their paces to discover which gives the biggest crop

Home-grown tomatoes taste better than anything you can buy in a shop, and if you want quantity as well as quality it is essential to feed your plants regularly. But are all tomato fertilisers equally effective? With so many products available, it's tricky to know which to choose, so we trialed 11 top brands to discover which produced the biggest tomato harvests.

We included a range of formulas – slow release, liquid, organic, non-organic – and discovered there were clear winners.

Tomatoes on test

To ensure a fair assessment, test conditions were strict, using the same variety – 'Shirley', an F1 hybrid noted for even cropping – which I raised from seed. Plants were grown in containers rather than in the ground to avoid cross-contamination, potted using the same multi-purpose compost and grown in an unheated polytunnel.

When it came to feeding, manufacturers' instructions were followed and crop weights recorded at every harvest. One plant wasn't fed at all and the contrast was remarkable: thin, weak growth, only three trusses of fruit and a much lower yield than any of the fed plants – just 1.1kg in total compared with the heaviest cropper, at 4.6kg.

GET YOUR TOMS off to a great start with our video guide at gardenersworld.com/sowing-tomatoes

RANKED BY WEIGHT OF HARVEST



BEST HARVEST

HARVEST 4.6KG
1 Chempak Soluble Tomato Food
 First harvest 14 August
Type Water-soluble granules, non-organic
RRP £9.99 (1kg)
Makes 1,000l
 Heavy crop of medium to large fruits, bearing six trusses on a sturdy plant. Granular fertiliser needed thorough stirring to fully dissolve in water. **Supplier:** thompson-morgan.com



BEST ORGANIC

HARVEST 4.4KG
2 Maxicrop Organic Tomato Natural Fertiliser
 First harvest 9 August
Type Liquid, organic
RRP £8.99 (1l)
Makes 225l
 Excellent quality crop of large fruit on seven trusses with strong, healthy growth. Rich seaweed-based liquid concentrate was easy to mix. **Supplier:** theecogardeningshop.co.uk



HARVEST 4.3KG
=3 Plant Magic Organic Tomato
 First harvest 9 August
Type Liquid, organic
RRP £4.99 (1l)
Makes 450l
 Produced the most consistently large fruits: six trusses on a healthy, very sturdy plant. Rich seaweed-based liquid concentrate that mixed easily. **Supplier:** greenhousesensation.co.uk



HARVEST 4.3KG
=3 Levington Tomorite
 First harvest 28 August
Type Liquid, non-organic
RRP £4.35 (1l)
Makes 225l
 Produced a good crop of medium-sized fruit, borne on five trusses on a strong, healthy plant, although one of the latest to mature. Liquid concentrate mixed easily. **Supplier:** homebase.co.uk



HARVEST 4.2KG
=4 Doff Slow Release Tomato Food Tablets
 First harvest 24 August
Type Slow release (tablet), non-organic
RRP £2.99 (12 tablets)
Feeds 1-2 plants
 Fruit on the first truss were small; thereafter, mixed sizes on four trusses. Easy to use: push tablets into compost. **Supplier:** garden centres



BEST LOW EFFORT

HARVEST 4.2KG
=4 Neudorff Organic Tomato & Vegetable Food
 First harvest 28 August
Type Slow release (granular), organic
RRP £7.04 (2kg)
Feeds 40 plants
 Good yield overall, variable-sized fruit on five trusses, mostly medium-small. Easy to use: mix 50g into compost when planting. **Supplier:** sandalgardencentre.co.uk



BEST VALUE

HARVEST 3.8KG
5 Homebase Tomato Feed
 First harvest 24 August
Type Liquid, non-organic
RRP £1.99 (1l)
Makes 230l
 A slow start with the first truss being very poor quality fruit, but then plenty of larger ones – five trusses in total. Thin liquid, so easy to mix. **Supplier:** homebase.co.uk



HARVEST 3.2KG
6 B&Q Verve Tomato Plant Food
 First harvest 28 August
Type Liquid, non-organic
RRP £2.97 (1l)
Makes 225l
 Small- to medium-sized fruit borne on four trusses, but are of the latest to mature. Thin liquid concentrate that mixed easily. **Supplier:** diy.com



HARVEST 2.9KG
7 Westland Gro-sure Tomato Easy Feed
 First harvest 20 August
Type Slow release (sticks), non-organic
RRP £4.99 (12 sticks)
Feeds 6 plants
 Small- to medium-sized fruit borne on five trusses with plenty of healthy growth. Easy to use: push sticks into compost. **Supplier:** homebase.co.uk



HARVEST 2.2KG
8 Ecoworm Soil Extract for Tomatoes & Peppers
 First harvest 9 August
Type Liquid, organic
RRP £5.49 (1l)
Makes 200l
 Fewer fruit but good size, medium to large, total of seven trusses. Liquid derived from earthworm compost, awkward to use as lukewarm water required. **Supplier:** ecoworm.co.uk



HARVEST 1.8KG
9 Baby Bio for Tomatoes
 First harvest 25 August
Type Liquid, non-organic
RRP £3.29 (175ml)
Makes 50l
 Lower yield of small fruit on a thin-stemmed plant, four trusses in total. Slow to dispense as feed measured in drops and at times came out unevenly. **Supplier:** homebase.co.uk



Liquid vs slow release
 Our four top performers were all liquid feeds, which not only produced the highest yield but also much larger fruits – they were mostly the earliest to mature, too. The downside of liquids is the need for frequent application (almost all were at least weekly). Slow-release fertilisers, in contrast, only require a simple one-off dose. Any surplus tomato fertiliser can be used on other fruit-producing crops (such as cucumbers and peppers), as well as on flowering plants.

Liquid fertilisers give plants a quick feed

Slow release provides gradual doses of nutrients

6 ways to get a bigger harvest

1 Boost pollination under cover by gently shaking plants so pollen transfers between flowers or use a small paintbrush to dust pollen from one flower to another. When the first truss has 'set' (when flowers have developed into small fruits), start feeding.

2 Keep compost evenly moist as fluctuations in water supply results in split, spoiled fruit or the disorder blossom end rot.

3 Remove side shoots regularly on tall (cordon) varieties.

4 Ensure the main stem of cordon varieties is well

supported and individually support heavy trusses of fruit to prevent them breaking under their own weight.

5 Cut off the growing tip at two leaves above the top truss, once plants have reached the top of their supports or have

formed seven fruit trusses (indoors) or four (outside). This helps the existing fruit to develop better.

6 Harvest fruit when ripe, as left on the plant it can develop and spread moulds such as botrytis.



1 Hand pollination boosts fruiting under cover



2 Prevent blossom end rot with regular watering



3 Pinch out side shoots to divert energy into fruit



4 Support well on canes to prevent stems breaking



5 Cut off growing tip to improve fruit development



6 Harvest regularly to encourage more fruit

PHOTOS: SARAH CUTLER; JASON INGRAM. WITH THANKS TO SINCLAIR/ARTHUR BOWERS FOR MULTI-PURPOSE POTTING COMPOST AND STEWART GARDEN FOR PLASTIC POTS AND WATERING CANS