



# top seeds

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Fat figs and tart toms – if ever there were two tantalisingly juicy offerings to whet the appetite it'd have to be these culinary delights. Seeds notwithstanding, they also have another common calling. They're BOTH fruits bending the branches with their bounty for this season's pickings.

According to the popular science magazine *Scientific American* – first published in 1845 and still going strong – there was an interesting recipe featured sometime during 1852 for preparing tomatoes in the form of a sweet preserve 'like figs'. A clearly diametrically opposed cooking method for chefs of today. But the magazine had it right, for scientifically speaking both are developed from the ovary in the base of their flowers and contain the seeds of their plants. Bingo. That's a tomato. AND a fig.

It's probably thanks to a U.S. court deciding the tomato was a vegetable (for tariff benefits perhaps?) that we

consider it so. The basis of the belief? A particularly unscientific theory that "any plant or part thereof eaten during the main dish is a vegetable ... If it is eaten at any other part of the meal it is a fruit." So there! Scientific fact be damned!

In the world of vege gardens and culinary art, both have their place in the plot and in the pot. Here Emma Sage explains how to get a good crop of both, and later Cliff Fernandes creates mouthwateringly magical dishes that maximise their flavour.





# from the garden

with Emma Sage

## Tomatoes

Tomatoes are a classic for beginner and experienced gardeners alike – and there's nothing quite like that freshly harvested taste. Cherry tomato varieties, particularly, are ideal for getting the kids into gardening. Perfect for little fingers to pluck and eat straight off the vine.

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### WHEN

Tomatoes are warm-weather plants and will only thrive and produce in the summer and early autumn. Sow seeds indoors in late winter or early spring and transplant after the last frosts. Labour Weekend (and beyond) is traditionally the perfect time to plant seedlings out in the garden.

### WHERE

With tomatoes, there's no negotiating position – full summer sun is essential. Plant at least 60 cm apart, though 1.0 m spacing is ideal. They can be grown in containers or garden beds.

Upright (or vining) tomatoes need to be staked and, preferably, the laterals (side shoots) regularly pinched out. Stake them early with a structure or bamboo, and continue to gently tie them as they grow. Old stockings work well if you don't have the foam-covered wire from a garden centre. Bush tomatoes are great for containers as they are smaller, and don't need pruning or staking. Companion plant with French marigolds and other bee-friendly plants to encourage pollination. Marigolds also ward off nematodes. They also grow well near basil, parsley, chives, asparagus, celery and carrots. But keep them away from potatoes, corn and brassicas.

### CARE

Tomatoes need a lot of water – but not too much. Soil needs to be moist, but not boggy. Aim for free-draining soil mixed with compost. They prefer a big drink once or twice a week over a light sprinkling every day. Feeding with liquid seaweed every week to fortnight will encourage growth, flowering and fruiting.

### HARVEST

Tomatoes are ready to harvest when they take on their mature colour (red, yellow, orange or dark purple, depending on the variety). They can also be picked while they're still a little green and ripen out of direct sunlight. Twist them off the vines so they come away easily and don't tear or damage the other fruit.

At the end of the season the plants will be looking tired but still carry green fruit. You can pull out these plants and hang upside down under a pergola to encourage the last produce to ripen, or harvest and leave them on a warm windowsill. Or make a batch of green tomato relish – delicious!



# Figs

Fresh figs, goats' cheese and a drizzle of balsamic reduction is the perfect autumn happy hour treat. Not only are figs tasty and relatively easy to grow, these deciduous trees provide lovely dappled shade over the hot months.

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## WHEN & WHERE

Figs' flavour is all about sunshine. They need lots of it. As well as protection from wind. If you can plant somewhere with a warm, north-facing wall behind them, they'll thrive. Grow in a garden or container (such as a half wine barrel), and buddy up with strawberries or marigolds. They'll grow in most soils, even clay or sandy, though they prefer nutrient-dense and free-draining. Add compost at the time of planting, then mulch with pea straw, bark or something similar once it's planted.

## CARE

Unpruned, a fig tree will get huge. Luckily they respond well to a good old cutback, and can also be easily trained, like espaliering along a fence or wall.

Keep roots contained so they don't get too out of control and become invasive – hence the reason why pots are a good option. Or bury a large container with drainage holes and plant the tree into it. Every couple of years, use a sharp spade to chomp around the edge of the area to sever any roots that have grown too far.

## HARVEST

Pick ripe figs through autumn and early winter (depending on the variety). Figs are ready when they're slightly 'squishy' when you squeeze them. But beware of the birds – as soon as figs get to our most desired ripeness, the birds will try to get them first! The trees can be protected with mesh if birds become too much of a pest. Fresh figs won't last long, so eat as soon as possible or make them into preserves.



# to the plate

Salad Days with Cliff Fernandes

Summer may be drawing to a close, but Cliff – our exponent on all things fresh and wonderful – believes that’s no reason to start stirring a pot over a hot stove. “I love the late summer when the leaves are starting to drop but fresh fruits are at their most flavoursome. Especially here in Hawke’s Bay. And I see no point in not making the most of the sweet succulence in their natural state.” So, for our guru, who garners a lot of produce from his own garden, serving summer fruits like figs and tomatoes in a salad (just skirting their natural state) is a given.

## Figs

“It’s one of the most ancient of fruits,” comments Cliff. “You’ll find many references in both the Old and New Testaments. And figs were used as a sweetener in desserts long before sugar came into the kitchen. What’s more, they’re good for you – high in potassium, iron, fibre and plant calcium. With all my food, I like to keep the ingredients as natural as possible. Figs in particular take to salty and sweet combinations, so I’ve created a very simple salad, which works particularly well as a starter.”

### WARM FIG SALAD

Fresh figs stuffed with blue cheese served with prosciutto and roquette.  
(Serves 4)

#### INGREDIENTS

4 fresh figs cut into halves  
100 gm gorgonzola  
1 sprig of thyme  
100 ml EVOO  
100 ml honey  
30 ml balsamic vinegar  
100 gm prosciutto  
250 gm roquette  
100 gm walnuts, lightly toasted

#### METHOD

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Meanwhile, cut the figs into halves and place onto a baking tray. Break the cheese into small pieces and divide equally onto the flesh side of the figs. Create a dressing by adding the thyme, EVOO, honey and vinegar into a bowl and whisking lightly. Spoon this dressing onto the figs. Leave the remainder of the dressing aside.

Place the figs into the oven for about five minutes, or till the cheese has lightly melted. Meanwhile, add the remaining dressing to the roquette. Add the walnuts and some of the prosciutto that has been torn into long pieces. Mix well and scatter onto a large plate. Place the figs on the salad and pour over any leftover dressing or juices from the fruit. Finally, garnish with the remaining prosciutto and drizzle with EVOO.





# Tomatoes

The tomato has come a long way since folklore days, when it was thought to be poisonous (presumably something to do with its likeness to deadly nightshade) and it never graced a meal plate. But the French, known for their innovation, changed all that when some marketing genius labelled it an aphrodisiac. It became *pomme d'amour* and never looked back.

“With this wonderful climate that we have, the varieties available are multiple (there are around 300 in total),” explains Cliff. “Personally, I like heirloom and steak tomatoes. I’m also a big fan of using seconds in season when I make big batches of pasta sauce. I simply crush and cook with a little garlic, fresh oregano, blend and add fresh basil. Serve with a lot of salt and pepper. Brilliant.” A secret tip? “I add the vines when cooking and just pull them out before serving – they give such flavour.” And his other secret to keeping their sweetness: “crush, don’t cut.”

## PANZANELLA SALAD

Serves 4

### INGREDIENTS

250 gm cherry tomatoes (heirloom tomatoes are the best)  
1 red onion, cut into thin slices  
1 cucumber, skin removed and peeled into ribbons  
1 red capsicum, cut into small cubes  
250 gm of baby salad leaves  
1 ciabatta, preferably a day old  
1 clove of garlic  
100 ml EVOO  
1 lemon  
Salt and pepper to taste

### METHOD

Start by toasting the ciabatta in a hot oven. Meanwhile, in a large bowl crush the tomatoes by hand, taking care not to squirt the seeds and juice all over the bench. Tear the tomatoes roughly into medium-sized pieces. Alternatively, you could just cut them into wedges and lightly crush with a fork. Add the olive oil and lemon juice to create a dressing.

Once the bread is lightly toasted, rub the clove of garlic onto it. Tear into the same size as the tomatoes and add into the bowl. Lightly mix and leave aside for about a minute, mixing in regularly so the bread soaks up all the dressing. Add salt and freshly cracked pepper.

Add all the other ingredients and mix lightly. Serve immediately, giving another drizzle of olive oil if required.

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You can find Cliff at CoLAB Café, 211 Market Street  
South, Hastings | [www.thedosaproject.co.nz](http://www.thedosaproject.co.nz)





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