

I want to be one of the Tomato People. You know the type. You probably have at least one in your family or at work. They are the folks whom, sometime around July or August, somehow wind up with more tomatoes than they know what to do with.

Now don't get me wrong... I like being one of the beneficiaries of their hard work. Fresh tomatoes are delicious! But there is something nagging at the base of my brain telling me that I want to be the person who gets to generously dispense these sweet, fleshy bundles. I want people to say "Wow, I can't believe you grew these yourself!" It's one of those things that you work hard at, and the reward is much kudos and affection. It's also one of things where the idea of having it **done** seems better than actually doing it. Nevertheless, I've been trying for many years.

First, you need to have some land to plant tomatoes. This is very important. I've only lived in small apartments since college, so this has been the first major obstacle. But why should I be thwarted so early in my tomato growing challenge? My bathtub was half full with soil before a friend clued me in to the fact that some varieties of tomatoes grow quite well in pots.

Year 1. I bought a seed packet. I germinated them inside during the spring. Alas, they never made it to the big pots on the balcony since they never grew large enough to transplant. I even tried a second batch. A gardening show I watched one day talked about germinating seeds in a damp paper towel in a warm place (like atop a refrigerator) for a couple weeks. It worked very well, but I think the trick is to not leave them up there too long. I was pruning my kitchen for months after!

Year 2. I decided I would take it easy on myself this time and go down to a nursery and buy little tomato seedlings. I brought them home, potted them, added some natural fertilizer (no, not from me) and put them out on my balcony. I made sure to give them as much water and exposure to sunlight as possible. About a week later, I went out to the balcony to find little tiny plant stumps where my tomato plants had been. Either the squirrels or the crows had at 'em. Personally, I think it was the crows. I've seen how they look at me.

Year 3. I was still living in the same place, so I decided I would try something that I could grow indoors. Forget the tomatoes, I just wanted to grow something... anything! Anything that I could be proud of and would be praised for.

Herbs! I could grow herbs! I went back to the same nursery, bought small seedlings of basil, dill and some others. I potted them and set them on the windowsill. Water – check. Sun – check. Plant food – check. Crows – safely outside. There was just one thing I hadn't thought of... my cats. Unfortunately, the mischievous furballs didn't know the difference between sweet, chewy grass and my precious herbs. Cat #1 had an affinity for gnawing on the dill. Cat #2 liked to pull off pieces of basil and bat them around the floor. Years later, I still find small pieces of dried basil among my stuff.

I had to put the herbs back out on the balcony. I didn't seem to have the same problems with the outdoor creatures this time. Unfortunately for me and many other typically successful gardeners, it turned out to be the year that we had a terrible drought all down the East Coast of the US. I couldn't keep up with watering my plants. I would

dowse them in the morning, and an hour or two later they would be as dry as last year's Thanksgiving turkey. (Maybe I should have bought a couple cacti?) I don't feel too bad about that particular year, though, since a friend of mine – one of those Tomato People – had given up on her herbs, tomatoes and many other plants that same week.

Last year was too hectic to do anything. I ate other people's tomatoes – usually with permission. They were tasty, but I still longed for that feeling of satisfaction that I imagine comes from growing them myself.

This year I'm living in a small condo with a tiny, yet adequate front yard – that is, it has dirt. I might try the tomatoes in the ground this time. However, I've already spotted a small group of woodland creatures gathering among the trees. I just know they're probably conspiring to gobble up my hopes of becoming one of the Tomato People as we speak.