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## Building Tomato Cages

Wed, 04/11/2012 - 16:29 -- John Walker

I want to share this written explanation of building tomato cages which comes to me via a gardening colleague, Roger Postley: First of all -- lets get this straight!!! There is absolutely only one correct way to raise tomatoes! (And that is whatever method works for you.) I have used stakes, trellises, store-bought cages, 'post and weave', and homemade cages. The latter has worked best for me and allows me the greatest production in the smallest area. The disadvantage is cost, construction time, and required storage space.



Unrolling the concrete mesh

I like tomato cages! Concrete remesh can be found at most major consumer lumberyards. It comes in 50' and 150' rolls. The wire is very strong and can be difficult to handle. Three essential tools are a small pair of bolt cutters, a large pair of slip-joint pliers, and a screwdriver type nut-driver with an interior hollow shaft diameter just slightly larger than the diameter of the remesh wire. There is variation in the rigidity of remesh ? choose accordingly; stiffer wire is stronger but harder to bend.



Cutting the sections

My technique for building cages sounds complex but is actually easy. Decide on the circumference -- I use 4', 4 ½' or 5'. Use bolt cutters to cut as many panels as you need cages. Cut down one edge of the 5' vertical wire roll so that there is a vertical wire on one edge and wire 'fingers' on the other. Place all the panels on end on a flat surface with all the 'wire fingers' pointed in the same direction. Cut the bottom ring off each panel (making the 'spikes' that will stick in the ground). Slip the nut driver 1/2" over each side 'finger' and use the leverage of the handle to bend hooks on each wire. Starting at the top, bend the panel and hook the top 'finger' to the vertical wire under the top ring. Clamp the hook shut with the pliers. Continue down the cage this way. The bottom hook must go over the bottom ring. The cage will now be "heart-shaped". Place the cage on its side and, with judicious pushing and pulling, bend it into a cylinder. Plan on getting rust on your hands and clothes. After a few weeks in the garden, rust hardens and is no longer a problem.



## Preparing the wire "fingers"

I make my cages in three different heights. The standard 5' cage is for determinate tomatoes. By cutting a standard 5' cage in half, you get two 2 1/2' cages which will slip into 5' cages making a 6 1/2' structure to support indeterminate tomatoes. Friction will hold the pieces together. For tall cherry tomatoes, two 5' cages make a 9' tower. I even use 3 1/2' circumference 2 1/2' tall cages for all my pepper plants. I originally used low pressure 1/2" x 10' PVC pipe, slip fittings (not glued), and electrical tie-wraps (black only - UV resistant) to construct a cross-braced grid at the top of the 6 1/2' cages and through the sides of the cherry tomato cages, in effect, making all the cages into one big trellis. My plants and cages are set in rows 3 1/2'-4' apart in a staggered grid with 3 1/2 to 4' between rows. If you have more land, increase the spacing. The grid is tall enough that I can walk under/through it without stooping, for ease in tucking the vines in the cages and for picking. Birds use the grid for perches and dart for bugs on the plants - instant biological controls! The trellis is a ?pain to build?, but it does work! By mid to late season, the taller cages are indeed top-heavy and would fall over during a thunderstorm. This year, I used an alternative to my former ?elaborate? ?grid?, which is to drive and fasten a wood or metal post next to every other cage.) I still use the ?grid? concept, run PVC pipe down the row, and lash everything together with PVC pipes and tie-wraps.



**Tomato cage: the finished product**

Using this 'vertical' growing method, I can fit 16-24 (or more, though crowded) tomato plants on a 12' x 16' plot. These cages also work for cukes, and pole beans! While there is an initial cost for materials, my tomato production is always heavy. Good luck. Article copyright of Roger Postley, reprinted with permission. Photos courtesy of me aside from the one on top which is courtesy of Les Stockton. Sincere thanks to Warren Moore for his help and generosity in the making of this year's cages.

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