Propagation: Transplanting and Thinning
Flat and Pot Grown Seedlings

When the seedlings have developed their second set of true leaves, it’s time to transplant or thin them. If you don’t need many plants you can thin them in place. Just pinch or snip off the excess seedlings, leaving the remaining ones spaced about two inches apart. If you have seedlings in individual pots or cell packs, thin the seedlings to one plant per pot or cell. If you want to save most of the plants that have germinated, you’ll need to transplant them to larger containers for growth to planting-out size. It’s best to use individual pots or cell-packs for this purpose, so that seedlings won’t suffer much root disturbance when planted out in the garden.

To transplant seedlings, fill each new container with moist planting mix. Water the plants to be transplanted if the soil is dry. Loosen the soil around the seedlings (a pencil, kitchen/plastic fork, or spoon may be used to lift the plants depending on the size of the rootball if the plants are in a flat); then carefully lift them out, one at a time. If the plants are too close together and are growing in a clump, lift a clump of seedlings and gently separate individual plants by carefully teasing apart the tangled mass of root. If the seedlings are tiny, handle them by their leaves to avoid damaging the tender stems. Poke a hole in the new container’s planting mix to insert the plants. If you have a larger rootball, you may wish to fill the container partially, place the rootball into the new container, and then fill soil around the rootball. If you are adding fertilizer such as Osmocote, you may wish to put in a small amount around the plant and then cover that with more soil. I often fill my pots half way, sprinkle in about a fourth to a half-teaspoon of Osmocote, depending on the size of pot, and then put in more of the moist soil. If I am using a quart container for a much larger transplant, I use a teaspoon of Osmocote. Firm the soil gently with your hand and then water the transplant. I like to use one-half strength liquid such as Miracle Grow. If the soil was removed from the roots of the transplant, keep the containers out of direct sunlight for a few days to let transplants recover from the move.

If you are transplanting leggy seedlings, set them deeper in the new pots. If the plants are getting too large, you might want to prune them back if you had to remove roots in the case of tangled plants. Also, you can prune the transplants if they are getting too large and it’s not time to plant them yet. In the case of tomatoes, you can root the pruned part in water or a pot of soil with rooting hormone. Keep the cuttings in a shady place and put a plastic bag tent over them until they begin forming roots. Then, remove to more sun.

About ten days before the seedlings are ready to plant outside, harden them off so they can withstand bright sun, cooler temperatures, and wind. Gradually expose them to wind. Stop fertilizing them, water less, and set them outdoors for several hours each day in a wind-sheltered spot that received filtered light. You can put them in full sun, but watch to see how they tolerate being outside and move to a sheltered spot if they begin to look stressed. A cold frame is useful in hardening off seedlings. Over the next week or so, gradually increase exposure until the plants are in full sun all day (shade lovers are an exception; they shouldn’t be exposed to day-long sun so try to put them in the shade). Your plants are now ready to be planted in your garden.
Plants will develop roots along the stem.

Cut off leaves leaving 1/2" stems & 80% of plant below soil surface.

Original root ball

Use this method for plants 10" or less.

Remove all leaves leaving 1/2 "stem.
Roots will develop all along the stem.

Use this method for plants greater than 10" tall.

Richard’s (Tomato) Rapid Start

1/4 cup dried coffee grounds
1/4 cup Epsom salts
1 cup sugar
1/4 cup nonfat dry milk powder
1/4 cup tomato fertilizer
1 cup lime

Combine all ingredients and mix thoroughly.

When planting your tomatoes, place approximately 1/4 cup in the bottom of each hole before placing the tomato.

— MG Richard Teruya