SOFTWARE & TECH

How To Sun Dry Tomatoes

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795584213849669

The Art and Science of Preserving Summer: A Complete Guide on How to Sun Dry Tomatoes

There is something deeply satisfying about capturing the peak flavor of summer and storing it for the colder months. Among the many preservation techniques available to the home cook, sun drying tomatoes stands out as one of the oldest, simplest, and most rewarding methods. The process transforms a humble, juicy fruit into a concentrated, chewy, intensely flavored ingredient that can elevate pasta dishes, salads, sandwiches, and antipasti platters. Learning how to sun dry tomatoes is not merely a kitchen skill; it is a connection to traditional food wisdom that relies on patience, observation, and the generosity of the sun. This guide will walk you through every step, from selecting the perfect fruit to storing your dried treasures, ensuring you achieve a result that is far superior to anything purchased in a jar.

Why Bother Sun Drying Tomatoes at Home?

Before diving into the specifics of how to sun dry tomatoes, it is worth understanding why this method deserves a place in your seasonal routine. Commercially dried tomatoes are often treated with sulfites to preserve color and are sometimes dried at high temperatures that can diminish flavor. When you dry tomatoes at home, you have complete control over the quality of the fruit, the thickness of the slices, and the seasonings you use. Moreover, sun drying is an energy-free process that connects you to an ancient tradition. The result is a product with a dense, umami-rich taste that retains a hint of the tomato's original acidity and sweetness. Sun-dried tomatoes are a versatile pantry staple, and mastering the technique will give you access to a superior ingredient for months to come.

Selecting the Right Tomatoes for Sun Drying

Not all tomatoes are created equal when it comes to sun drying. The success of your project begins at the market or in your garden. Choosing the correct variety will make the process easier and the final product more flavorful.

Best Tomato Varieties for Sun Drying

Look for tomatoes that are meaty, with few seeds and a low moisture content. Paste tomatoes, often called plum tomatoes, are the gold standard. Varieties such as Roma, San Marzano, and Amish Paste are ideal because their dense flesh dries evenly and concentrates beautifully. Cherry tomatoes and grape tomatoes also work wonderfully, especially if you halve them rather than slice them. Larger slicing tomatoes like Beefsteak can be used, but they contain more water and seeds, which will require more drying time and a bit more care in preparation. Whichever variety you choose, ensure the tomatoes are ripe but still firm. Overly soft or bruised fruit will not dry well and may spoil during the process.

How Many Tomatoes Do You Need?

A good rule of thumb is that one pound of fresh tomatoes will yield approximately two to three ounces of sun-dried tomatoes, depending on their initial moisture content. If you are planning to fill a few jars for winter use, start with at least ten to fifteen pounds of tomatoes. The volume shrinks dramatically, so do not be alarmed by the large pile of fresh fruit you begin with.

Preparing Your Tomatoes for the Sun

Proper preparation is critical when learning how to sun dry tomatoes. Taking the time to prep the fruit correctly will ensure even drying and a superior texture.

Washing and Sorting

Begin by washing your tomatoes thoroughly under cool running water to remove any dirt, garden debris, or pesticide residue. Sort through them and set aside any that show signs of mold, rot, or significant bruising. Even one bad tomato can introduce unwanted bacteria to the drying process.

Cutting and Seeding

For paste tomatoes, cut them in half lengthwise. For larger varieties, you may want to cut them into quarters or slices about half an inch thick. If you prefer a less seedy final product, gently squeeze the tomato halves to remove the gel and most of the seeds. You can also use a small spoon to scoop them out. Removing seeds is not strictly necessary, but it does speed up drying and gives the finished tomatoes a cleaner, more uniform appearance. For cherry or grape tomatoes, simply cut them in half.

Seasoning Options

While plain sun-dried tomatoes are delicious, you can enhance their flavor with a light dusting of salt, black pepper, dried oregano, thyme, or rosemary. A sprinkle of flaky sea salt just before drying not only adds flavor but also helps draw moisture to the surface. If you plan to store the dried tomatoes in oil, you can always add herbs later, but seasoning before drying allows the flavors to integrate deeply.

The Sun Drying Process: Step by Step

Now that your tomatoes are prepped, it is time to harness the power of the sun. Understanding how to sun dry tomatoes effectively requires attention to weather conditions, airflow, and protection from pests.

Choosing a Drying Location

The ideal spot for sun drying is a flat, clean surface that receives direct sunlight for most of the day. A south-facing patio, deck, or rooftop is perfect. You will also need good airflow to help carry moisture away from the tomatoes. A slight breeze is beneficial, but avoid locations where dust or car exhaust might settle on your food.

Using Drying Racks

Place the prepared tomato halves cut-side up on drying racks. Stainless steel or food-grade plastic mesh screens are excellent because they allow air to circulate underneath the tomatoes. Avoid using solid baking sheets, as they trap moisture and slow down the drying process. If you do not have proper drying racks, you can improvise with a clean window screen propped up on bricks or wooden blocks to ensure airflow underneath.

Covering for Protection

Sun drying exposes your food to the elements, including insects, birds, and dust. To protect the tomatoes, cover them with a fine mesh netting or cheesecloth suspended above the fruit. The cover should not touch the tomatoes directly, as this can trap moisture and stick to the drying surface. Weigh down the edges of the netting with stones or clips to keep it secure.

Drying Time and Temperature

The time required to sun dry tomatoes depends entirely on your climate. In hot, dry conditions with temperatures consistently above 85°F (29°C) and low humidity, the process can take anywhere from two to four days. In more humid or cooler weather, it may take five days or longer. Bring the tomatoes indoors each evening to protect them from night moisture and dew. Place them back outside the next morning once the sun is strong and any morning dampness has burned off. Turn the tomatoes over once a day to promote even drying.

How to Know When the Tomatoes Are Done

Knowing when to stop is one of the trickiest parts of learning how to sun dry tomatoes. The goal is to remove enough moisture so that the tomatoes are shelf-stable, but they should still be pliable and leathery, not brittle. A properly dried tomato will feel dry to the touch but will bend without cracking. If you squeeze it, no moisture should be released. Brittle tomatoes are over-dried and will be difficult to rehydrate. Under-dried tomatoes, on the other hand, are still moist enough to grow mold during storage. When in doubt, it is better to slightly over-dry than under-dry, as you can always rehydrate them later.

What to Do If the Weather Does Not Cooperate

Sun drying is an ancient method, but it is not always practical. If you live in a humid climate or the forecast is unpredictable, you have alternatives that still deliver excellent results.

Oven Drying as a Backup Method

Oven drying is a reliable way to achieve a similar result when the sun is not strong enough. Place your prepared tomatoes on wire racks set over baking sheets. Dry them in the oven at the lowest possible setting, ideally around 140°F to 170°F (60°C to 75°C). Leave the oven door slightly ajar with a wooden spoon to allow moisture to escape. This method typically takes 6 to 12 hours, depending on the thickness of your slices. The flavor will be slightly different from sun-dried tomatoes, but the result is still deeply concentrated and delicious.

Using a Dehydrator

A food dehydrator is another excellent option. It offers precise temperature control and consistent airflow. Set your dehydrator to 135°F (57°C) and dry the tomatoes for 8 to 12 hours, checking periodically for the desired leathery texture. Dehydrators are especially useful if you plan to dry large quantities of tomatoes regularly.

Storing Your Sun-Dried Tomatoes Properly

Once your tomatoes are fully dried, proper storage is essential to maintain their quality and prevent spoilage. There are two main approaches.

Dry Storage in Airtight Containers

Allow the dried tomatoes to cool completely at room temperature. Then pack them into clean, dry glass jars or airtight plastic containers. Store them in a cool, dark, and dry place. Properly dried and stored tomatoes will keep for up to a year. Check the jars occasionally for any signs of moisture or mold. If you see condensation inside the jar, the tomatoes were not dry enough and should be used immediately or further dried.

Storage in Olive Oil

Another popular method is to pack the dried tomatoes in olive oil. This softens them slightly and infuses them with herbaceous flavor. To do this, place the dried tomatoes in a sterilized jar and cover them completely with a good quality olive oil. Add herbs such as rosemary, thyme, garlic cloves, or a bay leaf for additional flavor. Press out any air bubbles and seal the jar. Stored in the refrigerator, oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes will last for several months. Always use a clean utensil to remove them and ensure the remaining tomatoes are always submerged

in oil to prevent mold growth.

Creative Ways to Use Your Sun-Dried Tomatoes

Now that you have mastered how to sun dry tomatoes, it is time to enjoy the fruits of your labor. Sun-dried tomatoes are incredibly versatile in the kitchen.

- Pasta dishes: Chop them and toss them with hot pasta, olive oil, garlic, and fresh basil for a quick, flavorful meal.
- Salads: Rehydrate them briefly in warm water and add them to grain salads, green salads, or Nicoise salads.
- Sandwiches and wraps: Use them as a layer in sandwiches or wraps for a burst of concentrated flavor.
- Pesto and spreads: Blend them with pine nuts, basil, Parmesan, and olive oil to make a rich sun-dried tomato pesto.
- Bread and baking: Fold chopped pieces into bread dough, focaccia, or savory scones.
- Antipasti platters: Serve them alongside cheese, olives, cured meats, and crusty bread.
- Soups and stews: Add them to minestrone, lentil soup, or beef stew for a deep umami note.

Tips for First-Time Sun Dryers

If this is your first attempt at learning how to sun dry tomatoes, a few practical tips will help ensure success.

1. Watch the weather forecast. Start your drying project only when you are confident in several consecutive days of hot, dry weather.
2. Do not overcrowd the racks. Leave space between each piece for air to circulate. Overcrowding leads to uneven drying and increases the risk of spoilage.
3. Bring them indoors at night. Even if the nights are warm, the moisture in the air can slow down drying or cause mold. Always bring your trays inside after sunset.
4. Use a fan for extra airflow. If the air is still, place a fan nearby to keep air moving over the tomatoes. This speeds up the process significantly.
5. Be patient. Sun drying is not a fast process. Rushing it by raising the temperature too high can result in tough, case-hardened tomatoes that are dry on the outside but still moist inside.
6. Label your jars. Different varieties of tomatoes will have slightly different flavors and drying times. Label your storage containers with the variety and the date of drying for reference.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Even experienced cooks can encounter issues when learning how to sun dry tomatoes. Here are the most common pitfalls and how to avoid them.

Mistake: Using overripe or bruised tomatoes. These contain more sugar and moisture and are prone to fermenting or

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