GENERAL

how to sun dry tomatoes

Published: September 3, 2026 | Index ID: #-

Sun dried tomatoes are a culinary treasure that bring a burst of sweet, tangy flavor to salads, pastas, pizzas, and more. While you can buy them pre made at the grocery store, nothing beats the satisfaction of making your own from fresh, sun rising tomatoes. This guide will walk you through every step of the process—how to sun dry tomatoes, what tools you need, and how to keep your dried fruit safe and delicious. By the end, you'll be ready to harvest the sunshine in a jar and enjoy a pantry staple that lasts for months.

Why Sun Dry Tomatoes?

Sun drying is a time honored method of preserving fruit and vegetables. It concentrates natural sugars, intensifies flavor, and removes moisture that would otherwise support bacterial and mold growth. For tomatoes, sun drying produces a chewy, caramel sweet product that's perfect for adding depth to dishes. Beyond taste, sun dried tomatoes are a sustainable option: they require no electricity, minimal packaging, and can be stored in a pantry for up to a year when properly dried and sealed.

Understanding the Sun Drying Process

Drying tomatoes under the sun is essentially a dehydration technique that relies on the sun's heat and the air's natural movement. The goal is to reduce the tomato's moisture content to about 20–25% of its original weight. This level of dryness prevents spoilage while preserving most of the fruit's nutrients and flavor. The process is simple, but it requires a few key steps: preparation, slicing, salting, arranging, rotating, and finally, storing.

Choosing the Right Tomatoes

Not all tomatoes are created equal for sun drying. The best candidates are:

- Roma or Plum Tomatoes: Their dense flesh and low water content make them ideal for drying.
- Red or Yellow Slices: Bright colors translate into vibrant dried tomatoes.
- Fully Ripe: Ripe tomatoes have higher sugar content, resulting in sweeter dried fruit.

Avoid overly watery varieties like cherry or grape tomatoes, as they take longer to dry and are more prone to mold.

Preparation Steps Before Sun Drying

Proper preparation reduces drying time and improves safety. Follow these steps:

Step 1: Wash and Trim

Rinse tomatoes under cold running water to remove dirt and pesticides. Pat them dry with a clean towel. Slice the tomatoes in half lengthwise, then cut each half into ¼ inch thick slices. Removing seeds is optional; some chefs leave them in for added texture.

Step 2: Salt or Brine (Optional)

Salting draws out excess moisture and enhances flavor. Sprinkle a light dusting of kosher salt over each slice. Let them sit for 30 minutes, then rinse the salt off and pat dry. Alternatively, soak the slices in a mild brine solution (1 % salt) for 20 minutes, then rinse and dry.

Step 3: Drying Surface

Prepare a clean, flat surface—such as a large, food safe screen or a tray lined with parchment paper—to hold the tomato slices during sun exposure.

Equipment and Materials You'll Need

Below is a quick checklist of items that will make the drying process smoother:

- Large cutting board and sharp knife
- Clean towels or paper towels
- Food safe screen or drying rack
- Salt or brine solution (optional)
- Food grade plastic or glass jars for storage
- Vacuum sealer or airtight containers (optional)
- Thermometer and hygrometer (for advanced drying control)
- Clean, dry cloth or paper for covering

Step by Step Guide: How to Sun Dry Tomatoes

After washing and cutting, lightly salt each slice. The salt will help draw moisture out, speeding up the drying process. If you prefer a brine, soak the slices for 20–30 minutes, rinse, and pat dry.

Arrange on Screens

Place the salted slices on a clean drying screen or tray. Make sure the slices do not touch each other; air circulation is key to even drying.

Choose the Right Day

Pick a sunny day with low humidity and minimal wind. Ideal temperatures are between 80 °F and 100 °F (27 °C–38 /°C). Avoid days with heavy cloud cover or high dew points.

Sun Exposure and Rotation

Place the tray under direct sunlight. Rotate the slices every 3–4 hours to ensure even drying. If you're using a screen, flip the screen or move it to a different spot in the sun to keep the slices exposed on all sides.

Check for Doneness

After 12–18 hours, test a slice. It should be pliable, slightly chewy, and no longer moist. The outer surface may appear slightly browned or wrinkled. If the slice is still soft or sticky, give it more time.

Cooling and Storage

Once fully dried, let the tomatoes cool to room temperature. Transfer them to airtight jars or vacuum sealed bags. Store in a cool, dark place—such as a pantry or cupboard—and they'll keep for 6–12 months. For longer storage, keep them in the refrigerator or freezer.

Tips and Tricks for Perfect Sun Dried Tomatoes

Use a Dehumidifier or Low Humidity Days

In humid climates, consider using a dehumidifier in a small, enclosed drying area. Alternatively, choose a day with a low dew point to reduce the risk of mold.

Use a Food Dehydrator for Consistency

While the sun is free, a food dehydrator offers precise temperature control and uniform drying. If you're drying large batches, a dehydrator can cut down drying time from 12–18 hours to 6–8 hours.

Prevent Mold and Bacterial Growth

Keep the drying area clean and free of insects. Cover the tray with a fine mesh screen to keep pests away. If you notice any greenish spots, discard those slices immediately.

Enhance Flavor with Herbs

Sprinkle dried herbs—such as oregano, basil, or thyme—over the slices before drying. This infuses the tomatoes with additional aroma and taste.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Overcrowding: Packing slices too tightly prevents air flow, leading to uneven drying.
- High Humidity: Drying in damp conditions encourages mold.
- Ignoring Salt: Skipping the salting step can result in overly moist tomatoes that spoil quickly.
- Leaving in Direct Sun for Too Long: Overexposure can burn the surface, giving a bitter taste.
- Storing in Light: Sun dried tomatoes degrade when exposed to light, so keep them in dark containers.

Creative Ways to Use Sun Dried Tomatoes

Once you've mastered the art of sun drying, you'll discover endless culinary possibilities. Here are some ideas to inspire your next meal:

- Salads: Toss chopped sun dried tomatoes with fresh greens, olives, and feta for a Mediterranean vibe.
- Pasta Sauce: Blend sun dried tomatoes with garlic, olive oil, and basil to create a rich, savory sauce.
- Pizza Topping: Sprinkle them on top of a thin crust pizza for a sweet, umami burst.
- Pesto: Replace fresh basil with sun dried tomatoes in your pesto recipe for a smoky twist.
- Snacks: Pair them with nuts, cheese, and crackers for a quick, flavorful snack.
- Soups: Add diced sun dried tomatoes to vegetable or lentil soups for depth.
- Stuffed Bread: Mix them with herbs and cheese, then stuff into baguette slices.

Safety and Hygiene Considerations

When sun drying food, hygiene is paramount. Wash your hands before handling tomatoes, use clean utensils, and sanitize all surfaces. If you're in a region with high insect activity, use mesh screens or netting to keep bugs away. Store dried tomatoes in airtight containers to keep out moisture and pests. When in doubt, discard any tomatoes that look moldy or have an off odor.

FAQs About Sun Drying Tomatoes

While some drying is possible, cloudy days significantly slow the process and increase the risk of mold. It's best to choose a clear, sunny day.

Do I need to salt the tomatoes before drying?

Salting is optional but recommended. It removes excess moisture and enhances flavor.

How long do sun dried tomatoes last?

Properly dried and stored, they can last 6–12 months in a cool, dark pantry. For longer preservation, refrigerate or freeze.

Can I use a dehydrator instead of the sun?

Yes. A dehydrator offers consistent temperature control and faster drying.

What if my tomatoes get moldy?

Discard any moldy slices immediately. Check the drying area for cleanliness and humidity levels.

Conclusion

Sun drying tomatoes is a rewarding, eco friendly way to preserve the vibrant flavors of summer. With the right tomatoes, a bit of salt, and a sunny day, you can transform fresh fruit into a pantry staple that adds sweetness and depth to countless dishes. Follow the steps outlined above, keep an eye on humidity and temperature, and soon you'll be enjoying homemade sun dried tomatoes that out

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