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Trellising plants, such as tomatoes and peppers, eliminates fruit-to-soil contact, improves plant health, and can increase marketable yields. Higher-quality and easier-to-pick fruit translates into increased grower profits in the marketplace. Trellised plants remain upright, are easier to and harvest, and allow for more effective coverage should spraying become necessary.

Trellising also promotes better air circulation that lowers humidity, allowing for more rapid drying following dew, showers, irrigation, or application of sprays. Vertical growth allows for a more efficient canopy to prevent sunscald of fruits. Trellising, however, involves a season-long commitment to keeping up with rapid midsummer growth.

The most common crops that basket-weave trellising is used for are tomatoes and peppers. When deciding which varieties to basket weave, there are a few characteristics to consider.

Tomatoes:

Determinate and semideterminate (also called “vigorous determinates”) varieties are best suited to basket-weave trellising due to their bushy habits. Indeterminate types are more frequently trellised using a stake-and-wire, or hanging string, method because they require more maintenance — pruning, longer stakes, and more frequent tying.

Peppers:

Most peppers are suitable to basket-weave trellising. The most popular type this method is used on are bells and other types that bear heavy loads of fruits and tend to lodge. Habaneros and small ornamental varieties are not typically grown using this method, as they are not as prone to lodging.

MATERIALS:

- 4–4½-foot stakes, at least 1-inch diameter
- Wire
- Sisal Trellis Twine (supplied in 10-pound 3,000-foot rolls) or Tomato Twine (supplied in 1,000-foot and 6,300-foot rolls)
- A short length of PVC pipe or a stick with a hole in each end for the basket-weaving wand

Posts at the ends of each row should be even sturdier, firmly wired back, and anchored to support the weight of mature plants and fruits as the season progresses. Leave 5–6 feet between rows to allow convenient maintenance and harvesting.

STAKE SET UP:

Drive stakes along the row approximately 12 inches deep, every 4–6 feet for tomatoes and every 3 feet for peppers. Cedar or hardwood can normally be reused beyond one season if sanitized before each succeeding season with either a chlorine solution or other suitable disinfecting agent. Avoid using CCA-treated (“pressure-treated”) stakes or other supports.

BASKET-WEAVING WAND

Since the stringing processes begins when the plants are about a foot high, without a wand the process has to be done bent over. A simple tool that makes basket weaving easier is a wand. A wand extends your reach when stringing the plants and improves ergonomics. Simply pass the twine through the pipe, or both holes in the stick, and tie the end of the twine to the first end post. Instead of using your hand to wind the twine around the posts, use the wand to apply the string.

BASKET WEAVING:

Place transplants midway between each stake and allow them to develop to 10–12 inches tall, when they will need their first “stringing”. Tie one end of the string to an end-post, then stretch it tightly across the *front* side of the first plant in the row, and on to the first stake; take 1 or 2 snug turns around that stake and pass the string across the *back* side of the second plant. Continue on down the row — front of one plant, back of the next, taking a turn or two on each stake until you reach row’s end. Now return back up the row, so that each plant is supported at the center of what looks like a figure eight of string.



Don’t wind the twine around the plants, as they will become strangled as the stems increase in size. Tie off securely when you reach the end post where you started, ensuring that all strings are tight, without sagging.

Following every successive 10–12 inches of new vertical growth, repeat this procedure. Some growers simply run subsequent strings down the sides of plants, taking a turn around each intermediate stake as they go. Others prefer to continue the “figure-8” process outlined above. Either way, the end results are strong, straight, well-supported plants with less susceptibility to disease and fruit damage.

Most growers basket-weave their crops 2–3 times throughout the full season.

PRUNING TOMATOES:

Pruning determinate and semideterminate tomato varieties is optional, but to increase airflow, prune side-shoots (“suckers”) growing on the base of the plant. To prevent fruit stunting, allow the first sucker below the cluster to remain, and avoid removing any lateral growth above. To preclude the possible spread of blight, wilt, or other moisture-dependent plant disease, prune only when foliage is dry, and use tools that have been sanitized before use — especially if they might have been contaminated by infected plants.

PRUNING PEPPERS:

Most growers do not prune their pepper plants, as leaf cover helps prevent sunscald. Some growers do, however, remove the first 1–2 fruits because these fruits are more prone to be misshapen or become sunscalded. Removing these fruits also directs more energy into growing a larger, more vigorous and better yielding plant.

