

CROP OF THE WEEK

# TOMATOES



Just a week or so ago, I was lamenting to Rachel that I didn't think I'd break even with my tomato plants. I'd planted expensive large-grade grafted plants but rats, birds and blight meant my crop was miserable. However, I spoke too soon – a rat trap and bird netting have allowed me to get a respectable harvest after all. I've had enough for tomato-and-avocado-topped Vogel's toast for breakfast and daily salads, and even some to bottle and freeze.

My plants look terrible, though, with blighted stems and brown, shrivelled leaves – unlike those of Shona Smith and Alistair Aitken, who have taken on the psyllids and won!

Shona and Alistair have installed a mesh-covered cage big enough to grow their entire tomato crop in. The frame is a fruit cage from [Hunkin Garden Products](#) resized to fit their garden beds. Tent-makers [Made in Canvas](#) fabricated a made-to-measure cover of horticultural mesh from the [Biological Husbandry Unit](#) at Lincoln. The cover has a zipped door and 200mm flaps on all sides, weighted down with wood and bricks.

Alistair says it's been well worth the trouble and expense. "It's the best fruit I've ever had. There's only room for 16 plants where I used to grow 24, but the quality is so much better."



Alistair and his tomato cage

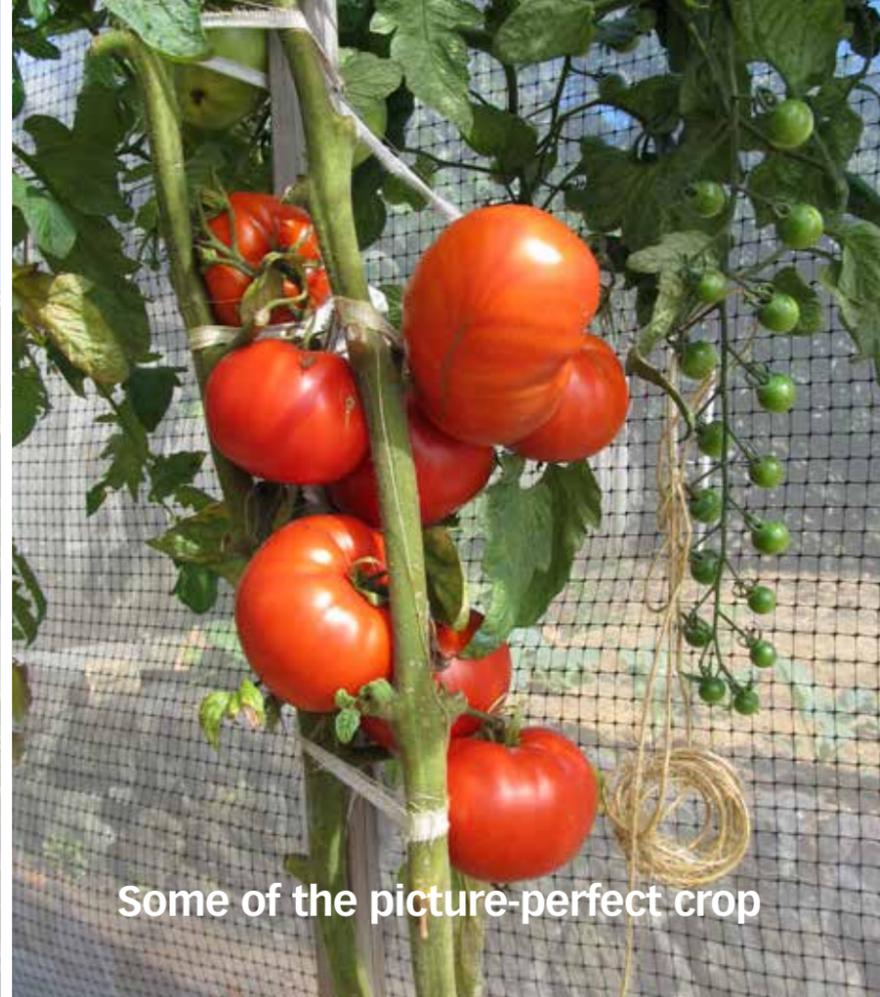
Psyllid protection aside, there are other advantages. The covered cage provides protection from wind and is warmer too. Auckland had a cold, damp spring last year, but these tomato plants thrived in the warmth of the cage and there was no sign of early blight.

There's no chance of bird or rat attack and no sign of green shield bugs, tomato-stem borer or other pests. Alistair says that by the end of February there was a touch of late blight, but it was easily controlled by removing the infected leaves and spraying with copper.

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The cage can be lifted and placed over other vege beds as required



Some of the picture-perfect crop

Alistair says he used to spray for psyllids but it was expensive and time-consuming. The cage saves him time as he now sprays much less often and only with copper.

Outside of the tomato season, Alistair will use the cage to protect brassicas from white cabbage butterfly. It could be used for any crop that isn't insect pollinated.

Alistair has cleverly planned for crop rotation too. He has three beds the right size for the cage. Sections of conduit pipe have been sunk into all three beds in the correct position to support the legs of the cage. When it comes time to move, the cage can be lifted from one bed to another.

The only thing Alistair would change would be to have only one zip on the

door. "It's really not needed. I just slip in and out and shut it up quickly."

And what do the couple do with their picture-perfect crop? Some are frozen for winter casseroles but most are eaten raw, oven-roasted with anchovies or given away.

In my kitchen, I've been making this delicious relish from our special edition, *Homegrown: Tomatoes*. The recipe was originally supplied by Auckland's Karen Rawlinson, who got it from her friend Lizzy. "She invited me over for a drink and nibbles once and I completely embarrassed myself with my inability to stop eating this dip until it was all gone. It's great with cheese, meats, pizza or anything else you can think of."

I replaced the dried apricots with four fresh nectarines and put the half-cooked mixture through a mouli to remove the tomato skins and cores. Don't leave out the fenugreek as it gives a unique taste that lifts this relish above the rest. *Barbara Smith*

### Lizzy's Tomato Relish

**Ingredients** • 2 tablespoons fresh minced ginger • 2 tablespoons fresh minced garlic • 2 teaspoons chilli • 2 tablespoons oil • ¼ teaspoon each fenugreek, black sesame, mustard and fennel seeds • 1 teaspoon salt • 400g chopped tomatoes • 6 chopped dried apricots • ¾ cup sugar

**Sauté the ginger**, garlic and chilli in the oil in a large pan. Add remaining ingredients, boil until thickened, then pour into jars and store in the fridge for two weeks.

### Tomato Concentrate

I freeze 1-cup portions of this concentrate for use in soups and casseroles.

**Ingredients** • 5kg tomatoes • 2-3 onions • splash olive oil • any of the following: 2-3 stalks celery, 2-3 capsicums, 1 chilli, basil, courgette, oregano, thyme, 1 tablespoon each celery and mustard seeds

**Boil the tomatoes** in a small amount of water for 5 minutes, then press through a mouli or a coarse sieve. Gently sauté the vegetables in the oil until softened. Add the tomatoes and herbs and cook until thickened. Freeze or bottle (water bath the bottles for 10 minutes).



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