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## 📌 Season Extender Comparison Chart

Compare every tool for stretching your tomato season — spring start-up, fall finish, and heat protection · Companion to *Ripe Rewards: A Beginner's Guide to Growing Epic Tomatoes* · [DirtDivaDiaries.com](http://DirtDivaDiaries.com)

**Timing is everything with tomatoes.** Plant before the weather is right and you'll lose seedlings to frost; wait too long and a short season cuts your harvest in half. The tools below let you push earlier in spring, protect through late frosts, shield plants from summer extremes, and squeeze extra weeks out of fall — all on any budget. **Ivy's favourite: Water Walls** — her secret weapon for short-season triumphs that lets her harvest weeks before her neighbours even dream of spring.

SEASON EXTENDER	HOW IT WORKS	PROTECTION LEVEL	FROST THRESHOLD (APPROX.)	SEASON GAIN	COST	EASE OF USE	BEST FOR	IVY & KEV'S TIPS — STRAIGHT FROM THE BOOK
<b>Row Covers / Frost Cloth</b> <small>SPRING &amp; FALL</small>	Lightweight spunbond fabric over plants or hoops. Traps warmth, blocks wind, admits 80-90% of light. Plants grow right under it without removal on mild days.	Moderate	<b>28-32°F</b> Light frost only	<b>2-4 weeks</b>	\$	★★★★★	Early spring planting, unexpected late frosts, fall season extension, insect barrier all season, summer sunshade in hot climates	Ivy's #1 all-season workhorse. "Frost cloth is like garden insurance — cheaper than replacing a dozen plants." Flip it to sunscreen duty in summer to prevent heat scald. Commercial farmers leave it on all season to block insects too.
<b>Water Walls</b> ☆ (Wall-O-Water) <small>SPRING</small>	Ring of water-filled plastic tubes placed around the plant. Water absorbs solar heat during the day and releases it overnight — creating a 24/7 thermal buffer around the plant. Works like a personal mini-sauna.	High	<b>16-20°F</b> Hard frost protection	<b>4-6 weeks</b>	\$\$	★★★★☆	Short-season climates, getting tomatoes in the ground 4-6 weeks early, areas with unpredictable late spring freezes	<b>Ivy's absolute favourite.</b> "In short-season climates, these are game-changers. They prevent frost damage like a boss and speed up growth like rocket fuel — you'll be harvesting while your neighbors dream of spring." Reusable for many seasons — great long-term value.
<b>Cloches</b> <small>SPRING &amp; FALL</small>	Dome-shaped covers placed over individual plants — glass, plastic, or repurposed jugs. Trap heat and create a miniature greenhouse over each seedling. Remove or vent on warm days to prevent overheating.	Moderate	<b>28-30°F</b> Light frost only	<b>2-3 weeks</b>	Free-\$	★★★★☆	Individual seedlings, transplants needing spot protection, budget gardeners (use gallon milk jugs with the bottom cut off)	Ivy calls these "dome-shaped cuties — like mini-greenhouses." DIY option: cut the bottom off a gallon milk jug, leave cap off for ventilation. Check daily — cloches heat up fast on sunny days and must be vented to prevent cooking seedlings.
<b>Cold Frames</b> <small>SPRING &amp; FALL</small>	A low, unheated box with a transparent lid (old window, polycarbonate panel) that captures solar heat. Acts as a sheltered, controlled environment. Can be used to harden off seedlings before transplant, then moved over plants in the garden.	High	<b>20-25°F</b> Hard frost protection	<b>4-6 weeks</b>	\$\$	★★★★☆	Hardening off seedlings, early spring starts, Zone 3-5 gardeners with very short seasons; cold frames recommended specifically in the book for cold-zone planting	The book recommends cold frames for hardening off: "It provides a controlled environment of protection." Prop the lid open on warm days — cold frames overheat fast. Ideal dual use: harden seedlings and protect transplants with one structure.
<b>Plastic Sheeting / Low Tunnels</b> <small>SPRING &amp; FALL</small>	Clear or opaque plastic draped over wire hoops or stakes, creating a mini greenhouse tunnel over a row of plants. Warms air and soil rapidly. Must be vented on warm days. Not breathable — remove or open during the day to prevent scorching.	High	<b>24-28°F</b> Hard frost with care	<b>3-5 weeks</b>	\$	★★★★☆	Row plantings, early spring soil warming, fall frost events; the book specifically names this technique for unexpected frost emergencies	Book: "Prop plastic sheeting over plants using stakes or hoops — a temporary greenhouse effect to keep them safe from frost." Danger: plastic doesn't breathe. Even in cold weather, interior temps can hit 120°F on a sunny day. Always vent or remove at daylight.
<b>Early-Maturing Varieties</b> <small>SPRING &amp; FALL</small>	50-65 day varieties guarantee harvest before first frost. Pair with any extender for maximum season length.	Built-in	Timing strategy — choose variety to match your frost window	<b>Full season assurance</b>	Free	★★★★★	Zones 3-5; beginners; plant Early Girl + beefsteak together for continuous harvest	Ivy: "Plant Early Girl alongside slower varieties — fresh tomatoes for weeks!" Early Girl (50-60 days) is the short-season champion.

Cost: **Free** = under \$20 **\$** = \$20-\$60 reusable · **Season gain:** estimated weeks added to start/end of season, varies by zone · **Fruit-set range:** 50°F-90°F · outside this range, fruit set stops

**Grow Your Own Way!**

## ↓ Season Extender Guide · Page 2 — Which One Is Right for You?

Decision guide by situation · Smart combinations · End-of-season strategy · [DirtDivaDiaries.com](http://DirtDivaDiaries.com)

### 🔍 Which Extender for Your Situation? — Match Your Need to the Right Tool

**🕒 I want to plant 4-6 weeks before my last frost date**  
 → **Water Walls** (Ivy's #1) for individual plants — protects down to 16-20°F and warms the soil zone. Combine with **black plastic mulch** underneath to also warm the soil. This is the most powerful early-season combo.

**🛡️ I need whole-row protection for an unexpected frost tonight**  
 → **Frost cloth / row covers** draped loosely over plants — the fastest emergency response. Or drape **plastic sheeting over hoops** if that's what you have. Remember: remove plastic in the morning before sun hits.

**🌞 My summers are brutally hot — plants stop fruiting mid-July**  
 → **Shade cloth** (30% shade) during peak heat hours. Or repurpose **frost cloth as a sunshade** — Ivy's double-duty trick. Keep soil mulched, water in the morning, and plant heat-tolerant varieties for best results.

**🏠 I'm starting seeds and need to harden off transplants safely**  
 → A **cold frame** is ideal — controlled environment, vents easily, doubles as early garden protection after transplant. Start hardening off 1-2 weeks before last frost date. Move seedlings out in the morning, back in at night.

**💰 I'm on a tight budget but still want a longer season**  
 → **DIY cloches** from gallon milk jugs (free!) + **frost cloth** (under \$15 for a 10-ft roll) + **early-maturing varieties** like Early Girl. Together these cost almost nothing and add 3-4 weeks easily.

**🌍 I'm in Zone 3-4 with a very short growing season**  
 → Layer everything: **black plastic mulch** on the soil + **Water Walls** over each plant + **early-maturing varieties** (50-65 days). The book specifically recommends cold frames and black plastic mulch for Zone 3-4. Water Walls can add 4-6 weeks at the front end alone.

**👉 I have green tomatoes on the vine when first frost arrives**  
 → **Top the plant** (cut off the main stem tip) to redirect energy to ripening existing fruit. Then drape **frost cloth** to buy a few more weeks. For already-killed tops, harvest green tomatoes and ripen indoors in a paper bag — they'll ripen naturally in a cool, dry spot.

**☔ I want the longest possible harvest season start to finish**  
 → The full system: (1) Black plastic mulch + Water Walls for early start, (2) Frost cloth for any late frosts, (3) Early Girl plus beefsteak varieties planted together for staggered harvest, (4) Frost cloth again in fall to extend finish. Ivy calls this "tomato yoga pants — stretch that season every direction!"

### 🔗 SMART COMBINATIONS — STACK THESE FOR MAXIMUM SEASON

**🏆 The Short-Season Champion**  
 Black plastic mulch + Water Walls + Early Girl variety  
 Best for: Zones 3-5 · Season gain: 5-8 weeks · Cost: \$\$  
 Ivy's favourite system. Water in the soil tubes, heat from below and above. Start 6 weeks before last frost date with confidence.

**👉 The Budget Stretcher**  
 DIY milk jug cloches + frost cloth roll + early-maturing variety  
 Best for: All zones · Season gain: 3-4 weeks · Cost: Free-\$  
 Almost zero investment. Cut bottoms off gallon jugs for cloches, one roll of frost cloth for emergencies, plant Early Girl. Covers all the basics.

**🌞 The Hot-Climate Extender**  
 Shade cloth (30%) + deep mulch + heat-tolerant varieties  
 Best for: Zones 8-10 · Problem: Summer production gap · Cost: \$  
 Keep midday temps below 90°F so flowers don't drop. Frost cloth can serve as shade cloth — Ivy's double-duty trick saves money.

**🍂 The Fall Finisher**  
 Frost cloth + plant topping at first frost warning  
 Best for: All zones · Season gain: 2-4 extra weeks in fall · Cost: \$  
 When the first frost advisory hits, top the plant to push energy into existing fruit, then drape frost cloth. Extend harvest well into fall.

**🌱 The Hardening-Off Bridge**  
 Cold frame → Frost cloth → Open garden  
 Best for: All zones · Purpose: Transplant success · Cost: \$\$  
 Cold frame for days 1-7 of hardening off, frost cloth draped at night for days 8-14, then open garden. Plants build thicker leaves and stronger roots — higher yields result.

### 🌡️ TEMPERATURE QUICK REFERENCE

TEMP RANGE	WHAT HAPPENS TO TOMATOES	ACTION
<b>Below 28°F</b>	Hard frost — plants killed within hours	Water Walls, cold frame, plastic tunnel
<b>28-32°F</b>	Light frost — cell damage, tip kill	Frost cloth, cloches, any cover
<b>32-50°F</b>	Chilling injury — growth stalls, nutrient uptake stops	Row covers, water walls at night
<b>50-90°F</b> ✓	Optimal fruit-set window per the book	No intervention needed
<b>Above 90°F</b>	Blossom drop — fruit set stops	Shade cloth (30%), mulch, morning water
<b>Above 95°F</b>	Sunscald, pollen sterile, leaves curl	Shade cloth + misting + afternoon shade

### 🍅 END-OF-SEASON STRATEGY

- ➕ When Frost Is Coming — Act Fast**
- ➕ Top the plant:** Cut off the main stem tip as first frost approaches — redirects all remaining energy into ripening existing fruit instead of making new flowers
- ➕ Drape frost cloth immediately** — buys 2-4 more weeks even in Zone 4-5
- ➕ Harvest green tomatoes** before a killing frost. Place stem-side down in a paper bag; the bag traps ethylene gas and they ripen beautifully indoors
- ➕ Ripen indoors in a cool, dry place** away from direct sunlight — never refrigerate unripe tomatoes, it stops ripening and ruins flavour

### ⚠️ Common Season-Extender Mistakes

- ! Leaving plastic sheeting on during a sunny day** — interior can hit 120°F in minutes and cook plants alive
- ! Using shade cloth heavier than 40-50%** on tomatoes — blocks too much light and kills fruit production
- ! Transplanting before soil reaches 60°F** — even without frost, cold soil locks out nutrients and stunts roots
- ! Forgetting to harden off** — seedlings moved straight from indoors to cold frames or outdoors suffer transplant shock

### ✗ Never Do These

- ✗ Refrigerate unripe tomatoes** — cold destroys texture and halts ripening permanently
- ✗ Use black trash bags as frost cover** — they trap heat by day but hold no warmth at night and can burn foliage
- ✗ Skip venting cold frames or plastic tunnels on sunny days** — even 40°F air outside can mean 100°F+ inside

### 🔍 Dig Deeper in Ripe Rewards

**Chapter 3, Section b** — Season extension techniques: cloches, row covers, Water Walls  
**Chapter 3, Section a** — Frost dates & timing your planting  
**Chapter 5** — Protecting young plants from frost  
**Chapter 6** — Managing heat stress with shade  
**Appendix B** — Zone-by-zone planting calendar

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