

It's All About Flavor

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Why grow heirloom tomatoes? Heirlooms represent a slice of history including people's personal memories of "the way it used to be" or "...my grandmother used to grow..." Even though tomatoes come in an incredible array of colors, textures, shapes, and flavor, there is only an ounce of actual genetic diversity among those varieties. But that is enough to start a dialog with customers and provide a jumping off point for marketing.

Heirloom tomatoes have been in the news for years, and with good reason. But after all the conversations about genetic diversity, the history and stories, it all boils down to one word - flavor. The home gardener is growing heirlooms for their flavor. The market customer comes back again and again for the "good old tomato flavor" provided by heirlooms. My seedling customers send me out to find "that tomato my grandmother grew" or "the perfect sandwich tomato". My personal search has been for the "perfect, no nonsense paste tomato" that tastes so good we can eat it fresh as well as consign it to the sauce pot!

Sometimes the subject of heirlooms and poor disease resistance comes up. I have to say that, in my experience, most heirlooms can be grown well and will be disease free if good conditions are provided. Ample spacing to provide plenty of air drainage, mulch to prevent splash from the soil, steady moisture, appropriate support, and minimal pruning will all contribute to a good harvest. Other folks maintain that heirlooms may bear fewer fruits than hybrids. In some cases this IS true, but in my experience well grown plants will bear well as a general rule. And it IS true that some heirloom tomatoes will crack on the shoulders. One of the factors that makes the heirloom tomato so appreciated is the tenderness of the skin. And it is that tenderness that makes many heirlooms vulnerable to cracking. The "secret" to limiting cracking is providing even moisture. Since the skins lose a lot of their elasticity as they approach maturity, a heavy rain (or drip irrigation left on too long) will swell the fruits and cause cracking. With heavy rain in the forecast it is sometimes wise to pick ripe and almost ripe fruits to protect them!

Market growers sometimes experience the "it looks funny" reaction to some heirlooms, but a tasting plate will take care of doubters! From a practical standpoint, a great market display should have a good mix of hybrids, standards, and heirlooms. There will always be the customer who can't possibly eat a tomato that isn't round and red! But that's where the tasting plate comes in - even dyed-in-the-wool red tomato folks can be challenged to try something new! In addition to direct market sales, the connection to chefs and fine restaurants provides another valuable outlet for an unusual and beautiful crop.

Trials of heirloom tomatoes can be a real adventure. I try to plan at least three years for a realistic trial, as the results I need are complex. I need to know if the variety

will produce at all in my niche of New England. I need to know how the variety will produce in the widely varying growing seasons in New England. I need to know the growth habits of the plant. It is amazing what differences of opinion there are when describing “healthy”, “sprawling”, compact”, or “vining” plants! I also need to know if the variety is sensitive to particular locations (mini-climates) on my property. I need to know when I can expect the first ripe fruits. I need to satisfy the question of whether this variety is actually unique. And last but not least, I need to know if it tastes good!

So my trials include several widely spaced plantings of at least 3-4 plants each as well as side-by-side plantings with suspiciously similar varieties. The true test comes in the second and third years when I grow out seedlings from saved seed. I carefully select fruit that meets the description and save seed to see if the variety will breed true.

As complicated as trailing might seem, it is still very subjective! The bottom line is still the flavor! I market my trials at farmer’s market right next to the tried and true favorites. The customers are very good at letting me know which ones they like!

The following is a list of some of my personal recommendations of heirloom tomato varieties. This list is based on both spring seedling sales and farmer’s market sales later in the season. The codes in bold refer to the list of sources which appears at the end.

REDS

* **Box Car Willie (80-I)** Abundant crop of medium to large size globes. Named after the country singer, Box Car Willie, who regrettably passed away in 1999. Not just the hobos’ favorite tomato - market customers will come back for these!

fest TGS Mari

* **Delicious (77 - I)** One of the early standard setters, Delicious was selected from Beefsteak aka Red Ponderosa, and introduced by Burpee. Fruits are a deep red, meaty, and can easily average 1 1/2 to 2#. Good old-fashioned flavor. A favorite among sandwich lovers. fest TGS SEx sand

* **Mortgage Lifter (90-I)** “Radiator Charlie’s Mortgage Lifter” was named after a man who sold his tomato seedlings and the resulting crop to pay off the mortgage on his shop! This is a wonderful firm pink/red beefsteak...great flavor...great story!

fest TGS SEx Mari terra

* **Red Brandywine (90-I)** Scarlet red, rounded, gourmet version of Brandywine! Regular foliage plant. Red Brandywine is a consistently good seller as both seedlings and at market. fest TGS Mari terra sand

* **Cosmonaut Volkov (72-I)** Round, slightly flattened red fruits. Prize winning fruits can weigh up to 2#. Named for a famous Russian cosmonaut who was killed while landing. fest F

PINKS

* **Brandywine - OTV Strain (78-I)** Dr. Carolyn Male, tomato specialist, researcher, and author of “100 Heirloom Tomatoes for the American Garden”, has selected seed from an old strain of Brandywine which she believes to be the sweetest and creamiest of all. The fruits are a rich pink/red with an orange undertone. Fruits are 12-16 oz. Very productive and more heat tolerant than other strains. fest TGS SEx Mari sand

* Cherokee Purple (80-I) Cherokee Indian origin, introduced in Tennessee. Bears 10-12 oz dusky rose/purple fruits that are delicate and a true taste treat. Vines should not be pruned as the delicate fruits sunburn easily. The flavor is excellent and makes the effort to take good fruits to market well worth the time. Customers will come back for more!
fest F TGS SSE SEx J Mari sand

* German Johnson (pink) (70-I) Pennsylvania Dutch heirloom. One of the “parents” of Mortgage Lifter, this is a deep pink, rich-tasting, medium-sized tomato. Large yields.
fest F TGS SEx Mari

BI-COLORS and GOLD

* Earl of Edgecombe (golden) (73-I) This tomato came from New Zealand with a sheep farmer who went to England to claim his title as the 7th Earl of Edgecombe! The round fruits are firm, absolutely smooth and defect free, and have a well-balanced sweet/tart flavor. Better flavor than Golden Boy, and a market favorite.
fest SEx Mari sand

* Hillbilly (yellow/red) (85-I) Heirloom from West Virginia. Large beefsteak type fruits average from 1 to 2#! Unique orange and yellow flesh streaked with red and pink. Flesh is firm, meaty and juicy! Rivals Pineapple! fest TGS

* Pineapple (85-I) Unique red and yellow striped huge fruits. The rich, fruity, sweet flavor, and dense juicy flesh make this an exquisite salad tomato. fest F TGS Mari

BLACKS

* Black Brandywine (80-I) Large, oval, well-formed fruits are DARK, almost black and full-flavored. Regular foliage. mari

* Black Krim (80-I) This is a medium sized slicer, with dark maroon to black flesh and distinctive green-black shoulders! Originally from Krymsk, on the Black Sea. Seed was originally smuggled to the US before the breakup of the Soviet Union.
F TGS SSE Mari Tur terra

* Black Prince (70-I) An old-fashioned slicer saved in Irkutsk, Siberia. Garnet-red outside and red to chestnut-brown on the inside. Some strains of these oval fruits will crack in rings on the top but a strain that doesn't crack is available from Tomatofest.com. The flavor is a complex mix of sweet and acid with mellow overtones. Customers need to taste these to be convinced - and then they come back for more!
fest TGS SEx sand

CHERRIES

* Broad Ripple Yellow (75-I) This little gem was literally found growing in a sidewalk crack in Indianapolis! A Seed Savers Exchange member saved the seed! A VERY prolific plant, bearing hundreds of 1/2” round, incredibly tasty pale yellow fruits. SSE

* Matt's Wild Cherry (60-I) Incredibly high sugar content gives this little cherry tomato a wallop of flavor! From the Hidalgo region in Eastern Mexico, where they are found growing wild. Great for fresh eating and salsas. Will self seed! J Ch Mari terra

* Tommy Toe (70-I) Hundreds of apricot-sized bright red fruits per plant, bearing right till frost. Very sturdy plants are disease resistant. Tommy Toe won taste tests in Australia and at the Rodale Institute. TGS SSE Mari sand

PASTE

- * Amish Paste (74-I) This one has been handed down for generations in Amish families. It is recommended as a “perfect” paste tomato! Good tasting too, so it can double as a slicer. Averages 7-8 ozs TGS F SSE SEx Mari terra
- * Corne de Bouc (mid) Stunning and delicious! The flavor is almost as fine as Hogheart, but the fruits ripen much earlier (long before the Common Ground Fair!) and are virtually blemish-free! 5” long, fat sausage-shape and intensely red/orange. Tur
- * Hogheart (75-I) This is originally from Italy, and for my money, the best paste tomato going! These are huge, often 12 oz! They can make twin fruits, really heart shaped! F
- * San Marzano (80-I) Sets the standard for sauce tomatoes! Rectangular pear-shaped, red, meaty, and averaging 3 1/2 inches. From the San Marzano region in Italy where the San Marzano tomato is a treasure...lifestyle...and heritage! TGS Mari Tur terra sand

SEED SOURCES

fest www.tomatofest.com is a good source of organic tomato seed, mostly heirlooms, all open pollinated.

F FEDCO Seeds, P.O. Box 520, Waterville, ME 04903 www.fedcoseeds.com

TGS Tomato Growers Supply, P.O. Box 2237, Fort Myers, FL 33902
www.tomatogrowers.com

SSE Seed Savers Exchange, 3076 North Winn Road, Decorah, IA 52101
www.seedsavers.org

SEx Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, P.O. Box 460, Mineral, VA 23117
www.southernexposure.com

J Johnny’s Selected Seeds, 955 Benton Avenue, Winslow, ME 04901
www.johnnyseeds.com

Ch Seeds of Change, P.O. Box 15700, Sante Fe. NM 87592
www.seedsofchange.com

Mari Marianna’s Heirloom Seeds 1955 CCC Road, Dickson, TN 37055
www.mariseeds.com

Tur Turtle Tree Seed, Camphill Village, Copake, NY 12516
turtle@taconic.net

terra Terra Edibles, Box 164, 535 Ashley St., Foxboro, Ontario KOK 2B0
www.terraedibles.ca

sand Sand Hill Preservation Center, 1878 230th Street, Calamus, IA 52729
sandhill@fbcom.net

EXCELLENT REFERENCES

100 Heirloom Tomatoes for the American Garden, by Carolyn J. Male, Workman Publishing, 1999.

Heirloom Vegetable Gardening, by William Woys Weaver, Henry Holt and Company, 1997.

Heirloom Vegetables, by Sue Strickland, Gaia Books Limited, 1998.

Livingston and the Tomato, by A.W. Livingston, foreword by Andrew F. Smith, Ohio State University Press, 1998.