

Beefsteak Tomatoes: Kings of Summer Flavor

by Craig LeHoullier



'Brandywine' is a popular heirloom beefsteak tomato that has been traced back to the late 1800s. It is available in both red and pink strains, both which offer a full-bodied flavor.

THOUGH CHERRY and paste type tomatoes have their fans, most gardeners reserve the act of drooling for the colorful, meaty monsters of the season—often called the “beefsteak” varieties. The term first appeared in an 1869 seed catalog, describing slices of a specialty tomato as being “as solid and meaty as a beefsteak.”

Beefsteak varieties have small seed cavities and a preponderance of flesh, making them easy to slice and perfect on sandwiches. Although the term was originally applied to red-flesh varieties, beefsteak tomatoes are now available in a rainbow of colors. Flavor-wise, they span the entire spectrum from mild to intense, sweet to tart, and simple to complex.

GROWING GUIDELINES

Ideal conditions for growing beefsteak tomatoes are the same as for any tomato variety: at least six hours of direct sun, rich soil that drains well but has good moisture retention capability, and a pH between 6.0 and 6.8. A loamy garden soil amended with compost provides a perfect growing environment. Beefsteak tomatoes also will do fine in large containers or straw bales, given sufficient feeding and watering.

Growing tomatoes from seed increases your variety options. Start seeds about eight weeks before the last expected frost. Keep them evenly moist and provide plenty of light. Transplant seedlings into the garden after the soil has warmed

and all danger of frost has passed. When planting, bury as much of the stem as possible for additional root formation, leading to stockier plants. This is also a quick “fix” for leggy seedlings.

Water plants as needed to prevent wilting during the most intense afternoon heat, especially after fruit set, and fertilize regularly to keep plants healthy, vigorous, and productive. Plants grown in containers and straw bales, which have a smaller reservoir to draw from, benefit from weekly doses of fertilizer.

Mulching has numerous benefits, including preventing the spread of disease caused by soil splashing onto lower leaves, reducing evaporation of water from soil, and minimizing weeds.

Most beefsteak varieties are indeterminate—tall growing and vigorously spreading until killed by frost or disease. Vertical growth can be encouraged using a variety of methods: caging, staking, or a technique called the Florida Weave, which trains tomatoes vertically by weaving twine through closely spaced vertical posts at several heights.

Additional fruiting stems, or suckers, form at each joint between the main stem and foliage branch; some people remove these suckers to control growth. But if you are caging the plants, no pruning is necessary.

PESTS AND DISEASES

A variety of pests are attracted to tomato plants and fruits.

Aphids, which cause leaf curling as they suck the plant’s juices, can be removed with a strong spray of water. Fruit worms eat holes into tomatoes, then consume the fruit from the inside; green tomatoes with holes can be removed and destroyed. Hornworms consume tomato foliage; these can be located by spotting the small brown balls of fecal matter below the plant and looking upward



Beefsteak tomato plants generally grow tall and will sprawl without support, so it's important to tie them to sturdy stakes or provide a wire cage starting when seedlings are young.

to find the caterpillars; these should be removed and destroyed unless they are covered with the distinctive white pupae of a parasitic wasp.

Squirrels and birds can cause damage to ripening fruit. Ensure that there are suitable water and food sources to draw them away from your crop or use physical barriers such as netting. Deer are also destructive both to plants and fruit. The only guaranteed protection is a tall fence, but I've had good luck using a sprinkler attached to a motion detector.

Several diseases plague tomatoes. Fusarium wilt and verticillium wilt are both caused by soil fungi. Sudden yellowing and wilting of foliage are indications of the presence of these diseases. Since nothing can be done once symptoms of these

diseases are widespread, remove the plants and discard them in the trash. The following year, select resistant varieties and plant them in a different location; sterilize cages and stakes using a bleach solution.



Excessive moisture can cause fruits to crack.

PLANTING BASICS

- Sow tomato seeds indoors, barely covered, in a sterile, soilless, moderately moist planting mix. Provide bottom heat if possible.
- Figure on one month from planting seeds to transplanting into a larger container, then one month more until planting outdoors. Work back two months from your last frost date to calculate the date for starting seed.
- Harden seedlings off—gradually expose them to outdoor conditions—before planting them outdoors.
- Space plants so that the mature plants will have adequate sunlight exposure and air circulation completely around the plant to minimize disease issues; three feet apart is optimal.
- Plant seedlings deeply; any buried stem will produce roots and result in stronger plants.

—C.L.

Early blight (*Alternaria*) and septoria leaf spot are both fungal diseases that hit above the soil line, often infecting lower foliage due to splash of the spores onto the plant during a rainstorm. Heat and humidity encourage early blight, whereas cooler, cloudy, or wet conditions favor septoria. Both announce their presence via spotted and dying foliage. Mulching to prevent soil splash is the best way to prevent or delay onset. Once it is noted, removal of the lower, affected foliage can slow the spread of the disease upwards.

Some tomato problems are caused by weather conditions. Cat-facing is familiar as the ugly, scarred blossom end seen on very large fruit. It often affects just a few tomatoes on a plant and is related to the weather conditions when the fruit sets. Cracking occurs when the tomato skin can't expand fast enough, often due to heavy rain or overwatering. Picking fruit at half ripeness helps to avoid cracking.

Blossom end rot—a dark water soaked spot on the blossom end—indicates that the plant experienced stress after setting fruit. Mulching and regular watering are recommended. It is also an indication that your soil is lacking sufficient available calcium; add a bit of lime if this is the case.

RECOMMENDED VARIETIES

Red: Both ‘Aker’s West Virginia’ and ‘Andrew Rahart’s Jumbo Red’ are meaty, one-pound-minimum beauties with intense, well balanced flavor.

Pink: ‘Brandywine’ and ‘Dester’ are absolute flavor knockouts. The former is more temperamental and variable season to season; the latter is more consistent in my experience.

“Black”: ‘Cherokee Purple’ and ‘Cherokee Chocolate’ look the same when sliced, but the lovely hue of ‘Cherokee Purple’ comes from the clear skin covering the deep crimson flesh. The rich hue of ‘Cherokee Chocolate’ comes from the yellow skin.

Yellow: ‘Lillian’s Yellow Heirloom’ is pale yellow with intense flavor, ‘Hugh’s’ is earlier and sweeter.

Orange: ‘Kellogg’s Breakfast’ is deep orange and sweet, ‘Yellow Brandywine’ boasts a more pale orange hue and a snappy bit of tartness.

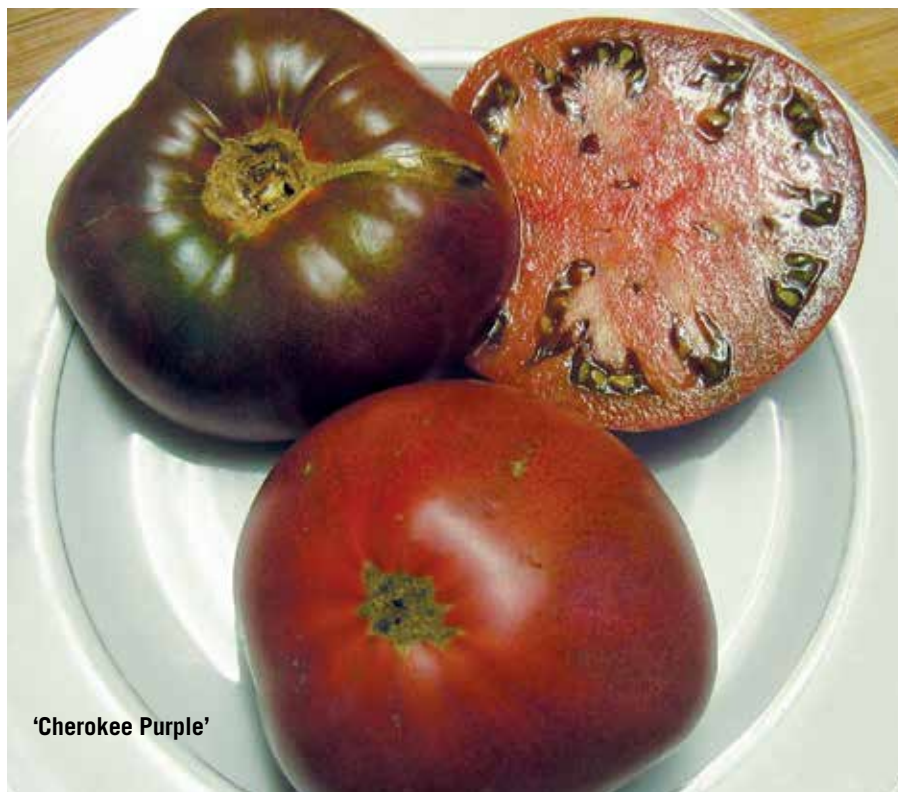
Green: The skin of ‘Cherokee Green’ turns yellow when ripe, providing a helpful harvest time guide. It takes a bit more practice to identify the pearly pink hue signaling ripeness that appears on the blossom end of ‘Aunt Ruby’s German Green’ and ‘Green Giant’.

Stripes and Swirls: ‘Lucky Cross’ is similar to ‘Brandywine’ in size, plant habit, and flavor, but dressed in swirls of yellows and reds. ‘Ruby Gold’ shows the same colors, but its flavor is mild, sweet, and peachy. ‘Pink Berkeley Tie Dye’ sports varicolored vertical stripes that make it pop on the plate.

ENJOYING THE HARVEST

I’ve found that picking tomatoes at the blush stage—when color is appearing, but only about half way to the final destination—is the best bet for ensuring you get your prized specimens before birds, squirrels, and other critters find them. Store them on a kitchen windowsill for a few days and they will taste just as good as vine ripened specimens.

The obvious way to elevate these luscious, often colorful varieties to stardom is arranging thick slabs on a plate—an act that brings forth many “oohs and



ahs”—or adding them to the proverbial “cover the slice of bread” type sandwiches. The meatiness, however, means that they can also play first violin in superb sauces and salsas.

Sources

Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, Mansfield, MO. (471) 924-8917. www.rareseeds.com.

Tomato Growers Supply Company, Ft. Myers, FL. (888) 478-7333. www.tomatogrowers.com.

Victory Seed Company, Molalla, OR. (503) 829-3126. www.victoryseeds.com.

Beefsteak tomatoes can beautifully. But if you have a nice big freezer, the easiest way to ensure you can use your harvest off-season is to freeze them. Simply wash and dry fully ripened, fresh-picked tomatoes that are free of damage, slip them into zip-top freezer bags, and stock your freezer. When you wish to use them in recipes, simply run warm water over them and slip off the skin. Though they won’t have that fresh tomato texture, the peak-of-ripeness flavor will be preserved in your recipes. ♡

Craig LeHoullier is an heirloom tomato expert based in Raleigh, North Carolina. He is the author of Epic Tomatoes (2014) and Growing Vegetables in Straw Bales (2015), both from Storey Publishing.