

flavors from the past

Heirloom Tomatoes



When it comes to growing and eating the best-tasting tomato, there's nothing better than a juicy, homegrown heirloom picked right off the vine.

BY KRIS WETHERBEE

TOMATOES HAVE certainly evolved from their beginnings in Pre-Columbian America, where the berry-sized fruit grew wild in the Andes Mountains. Over time, this native food of the ancient Aztecs and Incas migrated to Central America and Mexico where Spanish conquistadors encountered it; they transported the seeds across the Atlantic, in the process influencing a new culinary tradition in southern Europe.

Since then, tomatoes have spanned the globe and traversed through time. New varieties emerged from accidental or intentional crossings, resulting in different sizes, shapes, hues, and flavor distinctions. Seeds of favorite varieties were

passed down from generation to generation; those that persisted became known as heirlooms.

The complexity of colors and intriguing shapes, and the wide range of decidedly unique flavors give heirlooms the upper edge when it comes to diversity. It's that diversity that caught my attention 15 years ago, when I took my first bite of a richly flavored, mahogany colored heirloom known as 'Black Prince'.

THE RISE OF FLAVORLESS HYBRIDS

When mass transportation became available in the 1950s, the essence of the tomato began to decline. Heirloom varieties gave way to commercial hybrids bred to handle the rigors of mechanized harvest-

ing, packing, refrigeration, and long-distance shipping. Tomato skins grew thicker and the fruit became harder. Flavor took a backseat in the breeding of hybrids in favor of characteristics that enhanced productivity, uniformity, disease-resistance, and long shelf life.

Heirlooms can have their downside. Though some heirlooms are quite productive, many produce lower yields than hybrids. Also, heirloom fruits have softer flesh and thinner skins, making them less suited to long-term storage because they are more likely to bruise or spoil. But tender skins, plump juiciness, appetizing texture, and unadulterated flavor is a big part of what makes growing heirlooms so appealing for a home gardener.

WHAT IS AN HEIRLOOM?

A consensus as to what defines an heirloom still eludes us. One constant that experts agree upon is that it must be an open-pollinated variety. However, not all open-pollinated varieties are heirlooms.

Purists define heirlooms as varieties that are more than 100 years old, but most tomato growers accept any open-pollinated variety that has been in existence for more than 50 years as an heirloom. Common classifications include "family heirlooms" (varieties passed down from generation to generation), "mystery heirlooms" (varieties resulting from natural cross-pollination or mutation of other heirloom varieties), and "commercial heirlooms" such as 'Rutgers'. Originally developed in 1934 by Rutgers University in cooperation with the Campbell's Soup Company, this heirloom once produced 70 percent of the processed tomatoes in the United States.

"Whether the genes were passed down through family, friends, or commercially isn't an issue in my book," says Colorado grower Sue Oberle of Oberle Botanical, an eco-friendly farm in Fort Collins. "In fact, there's a pretty good chance that commer-

The Russian tomato 'Black Prince' is an heirloom variety with a rich, smoky flavor.



Top: ‘Watermelon Beefsteak’ is a meaty, pink-skinned variety with fruit that can weigh two pounds or more. Above: ‘Pineapple’ is a variety with a sweet and fruity flavor.

cially propagated seed is more likely to be accurate than the seed passed through the average gardener.”

POINTS OF DISTINCTION

There are probably somewhere around a thousand varieties of heirloom tomatoes (see “Top-Rated Heirloom Tomatoes”

on pages 34 and 35), and many are linked to a rich history or folklore all their own. ‘Mortgage Lifter’, for example, a large, pink-fruited beefsteak, earned its name when, during the 1940s, M. C. Byles made enough money from selling the plants to pay off his \$6,000 house mortgage.

HEIRLOOM TOMATOES BY REGION

Can’t decide which varieties to grow? We asked several experts to weigh in on their top regional favorites. The varietal descriptions follow on pages 34 and 35.

NORTHEAST Tim Stark grows about 100 varieties of tomatoes on 12 acres at Eckerton Hill Farm, near Lenhartsville, Pennsylvania. His top five: ‘Brandywine’, ‘Cherokee Purple’, ‘Eva Purple Ball’, ‘Green Giant’, and ‘Pineapple’.

SOUTHEAST Mike and Judy Cunningham started Country Gardens Farm and Nursery in 1982. Their top five: ‘Box Car Willie’, ‘Brandywine’, ‘Cherokee Purple’, ‘German Johnson Pink’, and ‘Watermelon Beefsteak’.

SOUTH Darrell and Lisa Merrell are heirloom tomato growers based on the outskirts of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Among their top picks are ‘Arkansas Traveler’, ‘Cherokee Purple’, ‘Germaid Red’, ‘Royal Hillbilly’, and ‘Sioux’.

MIDWEST Glenn and Linda Drowns have been growing tomatoes for more than 40 years. The couple maintains 10 acres in seed production and evaluation at Sand Hill Preservation Center in Iowa. Their top four: ‘Kellogg’s Breakfast’, ‘Martino’s Roma’, ‘Tiffen Mennonite’, and ‘Ukrainian Heart’.

MOUNTAINS Colorado market grower Sue Oberle of Oberle Botanical farm in Fort Collins recommends ‘Bloody Butcher’, ‘Cherokee Purple’, ‘Kellogg’s Breakfast’, and ‘Marmande’.

WEST Heirloom tomato expert Gary Ibsen of TomatoFest.com and founder of the Carmel TomatoFest gives top marks to ‘Gary Ibsen’s Gold’, ‘Julia Child’, ‘Kellogg’s Breakfast’, and ‘Paul Robeson’.

NORTHWEST As a former certified organic market grower, my picks include ‘Black Prince’, ‘Caspian Pink’, ‘Cherokee Purple’, ‘Stupice’, and ‘Tigerella’.

—K.W.

TOP-RATED HEIRLOOM TOMATOES

Grouped by the color of their fruit, the following varieties offer a range of flavors, sizes, shapes, and cultural preferences. Average days from transplanting of seedlings to harvesting of tomatoes is given in parentheses.

RED VARIETIES

'Bloody Butcher' (65–70 days): Deep red, three- to four-ounce fruits with full-bodied, creamy tomato flavor. Early producer, excellent quality and very little cracking.



'Box Car Willie' (80 days): Slightly flattened 10- to 16-ounce red fruits with an orange tinge. Dependably tasty, very juicy and abundant throughout the season. Disease resistant.

'Brandywine' (80 days): Big beefsteak-type Amish heirloom with a rich, well-balanced blend of sweetness and acidity. Heavy producer in the Northeast—not suited to hot climates.



'Germaid Red' (80 days): Rare variety with superb tomato flavor—sweet, rich, and juicy. Elongated beefsteak-type with deep red fruits weighing up to one pound. Produces prolifically.

'Marmande' (68 days): French favorite with traditional red fruits and distinctly rich and full-bodied flavor. Slightly flattened six- to eight-ounce fruits are meaty and great for slicing.

'Martino's Roma' (75 days): Superb, extremely prolific paste-type with richly flavored, three-inch-long meaty red fruits. Great for canning, salsas, sauces, and paste.

'Paul Robeson' (75 days): Rich and robustly flavored fruits are

earthy with a good acid/sweet balance. Dusky dark red skin and red flesh. Good for cooler regions.

'Sioux' (70–80 days): Prolific producer of two-and-a-half-inch, blemish-free red fruits with a slightly tart old-fashioned tomato flavor. Tolerates heat, pests, and disease.

'Stupice' (55 days): Early, cold-tolerant variety from the Czech Republic bears clusters of ping-pong-ball-size deep red fruits. Great flavor with a good blend of sweetness and acidity.



PINK / ROSE / PURPLE VARIETIES

'Arkansas Traveler' (85 days): Great hot weather producer of tasty, six- to eight-ounce rose-pink fruits with a low acid flavor. Tolerates heat and humidity.



'Caspian Pink' (75–85 days): Intensely sweet and rich Russian heirloom with large pink beefsteak-type fruits that rival 'Brandywine' in popularity and flavor. Great for cooler climates.

'Cherokee Purple' (70–80 days): Medi-



LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM: JERRY PAVIA; RICK WETHERBEE. RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: JERRY PAVIA; DAVID CAVAGNARO; RICK WETHERBEE

um-large dusky rose fruits with well-balanced, complex flavor—winey-sweet and very intense. Highly productive and disease resistant.

'Eva Purple Ball' (70–74 days): German heirloom bears two- to three-inch round, dark purple-pink fruits; balanced flavor with creamy texture; disease resistant and very productive.



'Eva Purple Ball'

'German Johnson Pink' (75–80 days): Potato-leaf type with huge pink fruits averaging over one pound. Excellent low acid flavor and great texture; very prolific.

'Julia Child' (78 days): Deep pink, lightly-fluted, 10- to 12-ounce beefsteak fruits have an intensely rich tomato flavor with firm, juicy flesh. Potato-leaf plant is very productive.

'Royal Hillbilly' (80–90 days): Strain of 'Hillbilly', with fruits tinged deep pink to purple. Flavor is exquisite, with a complex blend of sweetness and tartness, snappy yet smooth.

'Tiffen Mennonite' (85 days): Large beefsteak-type pink fruits with a rich, sweet-tangy flavor and smooth texture. Good yields.



'Tiffen Mennonite'

'Ukrainian Heart' (70 days): Semi-juicy, heart-shaped pink fruits weighing up to two pounds are remarkably productive with a well-balanced fruity flavor.

'Watermelon Beefsteak' (75 days): Amazingly big, pink-skinned fruits weighing two pounds or more are mild and meaty with purplish-red flesh.

YELLOW / GOLD / ORANGE VARIETIES

'Gary Ibsen's Gold' (75 days): Globe-shaped 14-ounce fruits are brilliant orange-gold with tropical fruit flavors and enough acid balance to guarantee a burst of tomato flavor.

'Kellogg's Breakfast' (80–90 days): Deep golden orange fruits with bright orange flesh and an exceptional sweet tangy flavor. Thin-skinned fruits have few seeds and are meaty throughout.



'Kellogg's Breakfast'

GREEN VARIETIES

'Green Giant' (85 days): Lime-green, one- to two-pound fruits are deliciously sweet and one of the best tasting green tomatoes. Potato-leaved German heirloom is vigorous and prolific.

BLACK / MAHOGANY VARIETIES

'Black Prince' (70–80 days): Russian treasure bears salad-size, chestnut to mahogany colored fruits with an intense, distinctively rich flavor. Does well in cool climates.

STRIPED VARIETIES

'Pineapple' (85–90 days): Eye-catching bi-colored fruits streaked with red and yellow inside and out are exotically sweet with pineapple undertones. Very fruity.

'Tigerella' (75 days): Apricot-sized fruits are red with stripes of yellow and orange. Exceptionally lively flavor; extremely productive vines are disease resistant.



'Tigerella'

Sources for Tomato Seeds

Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, Mansfield, MO. (866) 653-7333.
www.rareseeds.com.

Gary Ibsen's TomatoFest, Carmel, CA. www.tomatofest.com.

Marianna's Heirloom Seeds, Dickson, TN. (615) 446-9191.
www.mariseeds.com.

Sand Hill Preservation Center, Calamus, IA. (563) 246-2299.
www.sandhillpreservation.com

Seed Savers Exchange, Decorah, IA. (563) 382-5990. www.seedsavers.org.

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

Totally Tomatoes, Randolph, WI. (800) 345-5977. www.totallytomato.com.

Heirlooms feature a bit of the unexpected: Fruit can be round, oval, elongated, flattened, ribbed, or even lumpy; some are shaped like pears, acorns, strawberries, or sausages. And while red or yellow tomatoes bring exciting color to the garden and table, heirloom offerings also include shades of gold, orange, pink, purple, deep garnet, and rose as well as green, chocolate brown, white, and multicolored stripes.

Flavor varies from mellow to bold, with acidity levels ranging from naturally sweet to traditionally tart or classic full-bodied taste. Green varieties generally have tangy citrus overtones, sometimes with a spicy-sweet flavor; yellow types tend to be mild and sweet; bicolored types such as 'Pineapple' or 'Old German' are often fruity; and black varieties such as 'Black Prince' and 'Black Krim' are complex and intense, often described as smoky and rich.

Keep in mind that not all heirloom tomatoes reach their full potential in all regions (see "Heirloom Tomatoes by Region," page 33). "Every heirloom variety is genetically unique," says tomato expert Gary Ibsen. As a grower of organic heirloom tomatoes in central California and founder of the widely popular



Prolific 'Yellow Pear' is sweet and mild.

Carmel TomatoFest®, Ibsen maintains a seed bank of more than 650 heirloom varieties. More than 500 varieties of organic heirloom tomato seeds are available online at www.tomatofest.com. "Inherent in this uniqueness is an evolved adaptation to specific growing conditions and climates," Ibsen adds.

DO TRY THIS AT HOME

No matter where you live, there's no reason to limit your sensory experience to a

SAVING YOUR OWN SEEDS

One of the advantages of saving your own seeds is that you can eventually adapt a strain of the heirloom to thrive in your climate. The technique may differ among seed savers, but the goal is the same—to remove the moist, sticky gelatinlike casing that encapsulates the seeds and prevents them from sprouting inside the fruit.

1. Start by selecting fruits that best represent the ideal qualities of the variety.
2. Crush the tomato and squeeze the pulp and seeds into an open-topped container, such as a bowl.
3. Set the tomato seed-filled container in a warm spot and allow it to naturally ferment for three to five days or until it gets a stinky foam on top. Be sure to write the variety on the container.
4. Remove the filmy sludge that floats to the top and dump the seeds into a strainer; rinse well with cool water.
5. Spread out seeds onto a non-coated paper plate, several layers of paper towels, coffee filters, or other absorbent material. Put seeds in a sheltered area (not in the sun) with good air circulation for five to seven days or until thoroughly dry.
6. Label the seeds and store in an airtight container with silica gel or a tablespoon of powdered milk in a cool, dry, and dark location.

common red slicer when you can experience a cornucopia of flavor. This year, try growing several heirloom varieties. You may just discover a tasty old variety that becomes your new personal favorite. And if you save your seeds from year to year, you may develop a selection with its own interesting features and flavors.

(For advice on site selection, soil preparation, and tomato-growing suggestions, visit www.ahs.org and click on the link to a web special that you will find on the contents page for this issue.) ☺

Kris Wetherbee and her husband, Rick, grow dozens of heirloom tomatoes in their garden in Oakland, Oregon.