

<http://www.grit.com/farm-and-garden/heirloom-tomato-varieties-zm0z13mazgou.aspx>

Tomatoes, by Lawrence Davis-Hollander, ©2015

In one brief foray, it is impossible to completely capture the variety of beautiful forms and flavors that the heirloom tomato has to offer. Many of us dream about tomato season all year round, and, if we're lucky, we indulge in its splendor for a couple of summer months, then pack our taste buds away in hibernation until the next season.

The tomato is a member of the Solanaceae, the ubiquitous plant family that yields a number of ornamental flowers; edible fruits as in eggplants, peppers, tomatoes and tomatillos; on occasion, edible roots — tubers, actually, in the case of potatoes or the wild American potato, *Solanum jamesii*; and poisonous shoots, such as nightshade or belladonna and jimsonweed. Even some South American-cultivated and wild potato varieties are poisonous. About 1,700 species in this plant family are native to widely scattered regions of both the Old and New Worlds.

Tomato Through Time

The tomato belongs to a genus consisting of nine species, two of which are edible and cultivated. *Lycopersicon esculentum* is the common tomato of all sizes and shapes, and it is joined by its diminutive fruited cousin, the currant tomato, *L. pimpinellifolium*. Don't be fooled by fruit size, currant tomato plants can become quite large, rangy and dense, yielding thousands of sweet fruits with a distinctive flavor.

The wild *Lycopersicon* species are native to a 100-mile-wide band found along the coastal regions of Chile, Ecuador and Peru, occupying a wide range of ecological zones from moist river valleys, high mountains to 10,000 feet, dry sites, desert, and salty locations on the coast.

The parent of the tomato was *L. esculentum variation cerasiforme*, a small wild cherry tomato. There is no direct evidence of this plant being cultivated in its native habitat, although its fruits must have been foraged. It is believed that this wild ancestor slowly migrated northward, perhaps spread by animals or humans eating it as a trail snack, eventually reaching present-day Mexico where cultivation began, perhaps around 500 B.C.

The tomato is, of course, a fruit, called a berry by botanists. In 1883, the tomato may have been the only fruit ever defined as a vegetable by the Supreme Court.

European contact with the tomato began with the arrival of Cortés in 1519 in Mexico. De Castillo, chronicling the expedition, mentions cooking pots filled with a tomato sauce, and another similar sauce containing hot peppers used as a dip for the consumption of the limbs of sacrificial victims. Tomatoes from Mexico in the 1500s came in a wide range of sizes, shapes and colors. Except for a similarity to the cherry types, they did not resemble our modern relatively large, round, smooth tomatoes. These did not come into common cultivation until around 1870.

Many of the larger fruited varieties would have been irregularly pleated or ribbed in segments, botanically known as locules. Heirloom varieties that still bear some of these characteristics include Zapotec Pink Pleated, Purple Calabash or Costoluto Genovese.

A lot of interesting history surrounds the tomato. European authors mention the tomato beginning in the middle of the 16th century. It is likely the tomato arrived first in Spain and quickly diffused through southern and middle Europe by the end of the 16th century.

In most of Europe, tomatoes were regarded as an ornamental plant — and in some cases, medicine — and were generally not consumed, as they were associated with the well-known poisonous Solanaceous plants such as mandrake, belladonna and jimsonweed.

Tomatoes were eaten in both Spain and Italy, especially in the latter half of the 17th century; the first tomato recipes appeared in 1692 in Antonio Latini's *Lo Scalco alla Moderna*, printed in Naples. However, it's not until the first half of the 18th century that tomato recipes appear in cookbooks. Gradually, and sometimes quickly, the tomato-eating culture spread in every direction around the globe, although generally it wasn't until the 19th century that tomato consumption became commonplace throughout Europe and other regions.

While not commonly consumed in the American colonies, tomatoes were cultivated in the South as early as 1710, and, by the end of the 18th century, had spread through the Carolinas, the Gulf states, and up the Mississippi to Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. By the beginning of the 19th century, they had crept up the mid-Atlantic coast, and tomatoes were grown extensively in Pennsylvania in 1804. It took a little while to spread throughout the Northeast and, by 1830, tomatoes were well-established in New York and New England. Tomatoes were a distinct component of western cooking and helped define several cuisines, becoming an American phenomena.

Heirloom Tomato Variety Selection

Today, so many choices for heirloom tomatoes populate catalogs that it is hard to know what selections to make. First, recognize there are three categories of heirloom type tomatoes: historical; family and traditional heirlooms; and heirlooms of recent origin, which are varieties purposely bred or accidentally hybridized in the backyard or field, which are sometimes referred to as mystery varieties and consciously or unconsciously identified as heirlooms. These modern tomatoes are not really heirlooms, at least not in the sense that they are the same tomatoes our forefathers grew. A classic misidentification, for instance, involves the Green Zebra, a relatively modern open-pollinated variety with heirloom characteristics and taste. Most folks probably don't care as long as the tomatoes taste good.

Second, my advice is to experiment with what looks good or interesting to you, ask other growers what does well in your locale, and have fun by growing from seed an assortment of the vast possibilities. If results are disappointing in one growing season, try again another year or grow different varieties.

Here are a few of the larger red to pink tomatoes that I particularly favor.

Brandywine (Pink). If by some chance you have not grown or eaten this potato-leaved variety, you must. The large Brandywine is a pound-plus and somewhat oblate, pink, meaty tomato with excellent flavor, though not high yielding. What relation, if any, it has to the following tomato is unclear.

Brandywine Red. Probably the original Brandywine — released in 1889 by Johnson and Stokes, a Philadelphia seed company — with large red flesh and regular tomato leaves. An excellent beefsteak tomato, although it's not as good as the pink in my opinion.

Mortgage Lifter. A complex group of varying tomatoes with similar characteristics from the southeast have the name Mortgage Lifter attached to them. They tend to be pink, very large, weighing a couple of pounds or more in good growing conditions, somewhat irregularly shaped. The most well known is Radiator Charlie's bred by Charlie Byles in West Virginia in the 1930s. Very good flavor.

Pruden's Purple. Another large, pink potato-leaved variety with good flavor, good yields and relatively early maturing for a large-fruited tomato.

Eva Purple Ball. About the size of a tennis ball, the uniformly shaped, spherical, 8-ounce pink tomatoes have good to occasionally excellent flavor depending on the year, and they were supposedly brought from Germany in the late 19th century. Similar to Trucker's Favorite, which was introduced in the 1920s.

Henderson's Pink Ponderosa. Another big pink beefsteak, the fruit is from 1 to 2 pounds in size with excellent taste, and it was introduced in 1891 by Henderson Seed Co. of New York. A selection of this variety, introduced in 1924 by Henderson's, Wins All (or Winsall) is also excellent.

Livingston's Beauty. The original Livingston Seed Co. introduced many classic tomatoes in the late 19th century. The Beauty is a pink oblate, 6 to 8 ounces in size, with good flavor. Seeds of Livingston introductions are difficult to find.

A number of seed companies are dedicating efforts to keeping these varieties of tomatoes available. Home gardeners also are among those fighting to save these heirloom breeds, and once you taste an heirloom variety straight off the vine, you'll count yourself among their number.