

What is an Heirloom Tomato?

There is a range of definitions, but they all have these elements in common:

- its origin goes back before tomatoes were commonly hybridized for commercial grocers (at least 50 yrs. ago);
- the seed was saved by family gardeners around the world and passed on, usually to family or friends; generally the seed that was saved of the best "tasting" tomatoes (as opposed to the reddest, roundest, or most shippable);
- heirlooms are open-pollinated and will grow true to seed (hybrids don't)

Part 1. How to Choose Among the 100's of Heirloom Varieties

A. Think about how you like to eat or cook with your tomatoes:

- Do you live for those summer BLTs? Like to just slice a bunch of juicy big tomatoes with a wide range of beautiful colors, add a little mozzarella and drizzle with balsamic vinegar? If these are your favorite ways to use summer tomatoes, you need to grow some "slicer" tomatoes. Choose from the colorful range of slicers listed on the tomato variety chart at the end of this article.
- Do you make a lot of sauces & salsas? Choose a meatier tomato (as opposed to juicier) with few seeds. These are listed as paste/sauce tomatoes on the tomato variety chart.
- Like to eat those sweet little round gems straight off the vine with your kids? Like tons of yield and small tomatoes that can be plopped right into a salad without slicing or dicing? Choose from a colorful range of cherry tomatoes on variety chart (note: most cherry tomatoes are hybrids).
- Do you think ahead to the winter months and want to preserve that fresh tomato taste by canning or drying? Try Principe Borghese for drying & a variety that says "meaty" for canning.
- For decks, apartments and container growing, you can't beat Bush Champion (a hybrid).

B. Determine if it is really an heirloom you want, or a good hybrid

The pros of heirloom tomatoes are primarily taste & variety. You can't beat a well-grown (stress well-grown) heirloom for taste. You can also get some very unique colors, shapes and tastes.

The cons of heirlooms. (they do have important cons) are mainly centered on growing. They do not have any disease resistance bred into them, so if your area is susceptible to disease, your heirlooms will be more likely to get it. The larger beefsteak-type heirlooms are also generally later to bear fruit, yields are less and the tomatoes are more likely to have blemishes (i.e., like green shoulders and cracking).

If you want to try heirlooms for the first time, I usually recommend getting one good main-season hybrid also, as a little insurance that you will get some good-eating homegrown tomatoes if your heirlooms go bottom up. There are some very good hybrid tomatoes --try Delicious, Carmello, or another slicer type. If you're looking for the best taste in a hybrid, stay away from the early varieties and go main-season (in general the early tomatoes are smaller and don't have quite as much taste).

The very most important thing to having a great-tasting tomato is to pick it when it's perfectly ripe, and eat it fresh. The next most important thing for taste is getting your soil and fertilizers right (see "how to grow" section). Last, but not least is the variety of tomato you choose. Heirlooms are wonderful and unique, but many hybrids are great also if they're homegrown and picked ripe.

Part 2: How to Grow the Best Tasting Tomatoes

A. *The Basics:*

- Plant them deep: If it is a bigger plant, take off the bottom leaves and bury up to the first set of new leaves. If the soil is still cold and your plant stem is long, just dig a wider hole and stretch the stem out horizontally. It will grow roots everywhere there was a leaf you picked off.
- Location: Perfect weather for tomatoes is 75 degrees F -- too hot and tomatoes won't set their blossoms, too cold and they can be stunted. Place them in a sunny location (6 hours or more a day), but not necessarily hot sun all day. If you need to keep your site cooler, mulch the soil. Night temps below 55 degrees when tomatoes are in bloom can cause catfacing (concentric scarring around the top), so they need shelter when cold (don't plant too early for your climate).
- Water: They need more water at the beginning of their life and less after the blossoms have appeared (too much watering after blossoming and they won't set their sugars as well. Drip tape is best because you get consistent watering (consistent is a big word in the tomato world). A heavy rain (or watering) after a dry spell will cause splitting and cracking. Avoid this by using mulch. Never let the soil dry out and then try to compensate by watering heavily.
- Soil: They like a pH of 6.5 to 7. If your pH is low, you may want to add lime to the soil. What tomatoes really like is the Magnesium and Calcium, and you can get that by watering with a couple of Tablespoons of Epsom salts mixed in with the water every couple of weeks or so as bloom begins.
- Mulching: This is important for preventing tomato blight. Tomato blight is caused by rain splashing the soil back up on the tomato's leaves. If you mulch it will help prevent this. Any mulch works, and they all have their pros and cons. Straw is great, but you may get slugs; plastic works but it's kind of ugly and you need to use drip tape under it; woodchips are good, but you may get field mice or small rodents who hide in it; newspaper, grass clippings, rock, cocoa shells, etc all work for mulch and have pros and cons. Just use something!
- Fertilizing: Compost and Epsom salts work well if you're organic. If not growing organically, any tomato-specific fertilizer product from the store works fine for a good N-P-K balance for tomatoes. Just make sure you don't overdo it. Too much Nitrogen and you'll get beautiful dark green leaves and not many tomatoes. Green shoulders are a lack of potassium in the soil -- feed with a 5-10-10 fertilizer.

B. *Beyond Basics:*

- Supporting Plants: Many gardeners set their tomatoes inside a cage for support. With heirlooms (especially the large heirlooms) this often results in a mass of growth inside the cage, making it hard for the sun to penetrate and ripen all of those potential tomatoes. An additional challenge with many heirlooms is that they tend to be mostly indeterminate varieties. This means they are going to get very tall (also means they will keep producing until frost), and they may flop over the top of the cages. There are many different approaches to caging & staking, each with their advocates, but the most important thing is to match the support to your own gardening style and the amount of space you have available. Basically the methods involve a form of caging, staking or sprawling, as described below.
 - a) Sprawling: There is nothing wrong with allowing your plants to sprawl on the ground. You will probably get the most tomatoes for the least amount of work, but they may not all be top quality tomatoes because they may be susceptible to damage from the soil. If using the sprawl method, allow at least 3 feet between each plant, and be sure to mulch the soil with something to cut down on damage.
 - b) Caging: Commercial cages that you get from the local store are almost always too short. You can make your own with concrete reinforcing wire to form a circle 20-24" in diameter and about 60" high. Set cages 2'-3' apart. I have had success with setting 2 tomatoes around the "outside" of a tall cage (5' tall) rather than inside the cage. Anchor the cage by pounding 6-

foot lengths of rebar in the ground on opposite sides of the cage and tying the tomato vines to the rebar as they grow taller. Throughout the growing season you can add organic waste from the garden to the inside of the cage which will act as a mulch for the weeds and also give you a great form of compost.

- c) Staking: Begin by tying plants to a strong stake when they are 6" -8" tall. Use soft material so as not to harm tender stems. Staking is a summer-long activity; you'll need to continue tying tall plants to stakes as they climb upward throughout the season. To control the size of a staked tomato, pinch off the suckers that grow in the crotches of the larger stems once a week. Although you do not get as many tomatoes with staking, the fruit ripens earlier.
 - d) Basket-weave method: this is a favorite of many gardeners who grow a lot of tomatoes each season. You drive 4-5' stakes in the ground between every two plants, and, starting about 1' above ground, weave twine in and out in front of and behind tomatoes and stakes. As tomatoes grow, weave more levels of twine, each about 1' higher than the last.
- Harvesting: Many heirlooms do not have a very long shelf life. They have thin skins and ripen quickly at room temperature. Use them right away after harvesting (best), or harvest at breaker stage (when they are starting to color up) if you are going to keep them for several days. Other sidenotes: they tend to have thick stems so hand clip the plants. They are also a little softer than hybrids so don't pack them on top of each other when harvesting.
 - Maturity dates: Estimates are often given for "days to maturity". This of course is going to depend on the climate in your area. For a realistic estimate, check local weather pages to find out the average monthly temp for the first month your tomato plants are outside. Add 4 days to the estimate for every degree the average is below 70 degrees. For example, if your average monthly temp is 65 degrees, add 20 days to estimated number of days to maturity.
 - Sugar/Acid balance: Different varieties will express different ratios of sugar to acid balance. Just remember, if you pick a tomato before it is fully ripe, it will keep turning red but its supply of sugars has been cut off and it will not develop its optimum flavor or wonderful aroma. If you want to be safe, remove flowers and tiny fruit a month before frost so energy is used to ripen fruit.

