

Better Tasting Home-Grown Tomatoes



Photo to be credited to Stirwise.com: There is nothing better than a home-grown tomato. But taste varies greatly with the variety chosen.

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How often have we heard someone say, “Tomatoes just don’t taste as good as they used to.” There could be several reasons for this. Things sometimes seem better when filtered through the years since our youth. On the other hand, different varieties of tomatoes were available long ago that were grown using somewhat different methods.

There is renewed interest in the “heirloom” varieties of tomato in hopes of bringing back the home grown flavor of our childhood memories. According to *Taylor’s Guide to Heirloom Vegetables*, a tomato must meet three criteria to be considered an heirloom variety. The variety must be “true to type” from seed saved from each fruit; seed must have been available for more than fifty years; and the tomato variety must have a history or folklore of its own.

The University of Florida established two trials testing fifteen different kinds of heirloom tomatoes. Some of the varieties included in the trial were Cherokee Purple, Eva Purple Ball, Nebraska Wedding, Mary Ann, Green Zebra, Black Prince, Pink Ping Pong, Lemon Boy, Arkansas Traveler, Garden Peach, Flamme, Clear Pink Early and Mr. Stripey.

The tomatoes in the trials were grown using standard commercial production techniques. Data was collected regarding yield, fruit size, number of fruits, disease resistance and number of unblemished fruit.

The heirloom varieties tested would not stand up to the picking, packing, and shipping rigors of the Florida commercial tomato market. However, for the vine ripe specialty market and possibly for home production, a few varieties were notable.

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In one study, Eva Purple Ball stored extremely well, had good color and produced few culls. Garden Peach and Flamme were also low cull varieties, but were very thin walled and had low shelf life. Green Zebra and Lemon Boy, though having a high cull rate, had excellent color, thick walls and suitable storing capacity.

In a 1998 study, Clear Early Pink produced the greatest volume of unblemished fruit. Arkansas Traveler produced the largest fruit in the trial. This variety, along with Ping Pong produced the largest percentage of unblemished fruit.

Some growers are interested in developing a commercial market for heirloom tomatoes. One company is looking at an heirloom, beef-steak style tomato trademarked as Ugly Ripe. It produces large, wrinkled tomatoes and is said to have excellent flavor.

Don't expect to find an unlimited supply of heirloom tomatoes available at the market any time soon. So far, this is a niche' market requiring special growing, harvesting and packaging techniques to ensure high quality.

Heirloom tomatoes can be grown in the home vegetable garden, but only with special consideration. Most of these varieties do not have a high level of disease resistance that is present in some of the newer varieties. Leaf blights, wilts and nematodes are more likely to cause problems unless precautions are taken.

Space plants at least three to four feet apart so that there is good air movement between plants at maturity. Avoid planting heirloom varieties where tomatoes have been grown before if possible. Otherwise, rotate the planting of vegetables so that tomatoes are not planted in the same place for several years. Avoid wetting the foliage when watering and do not harvest or handle plants while they are wet.

More information about growing tomatoes can be found online at http://www.co.santa-rosa.fl.us/santa_rosa/extension/tomato.html University of Florida offers a publication entitled "Tomatoes in the Florida Garden" at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/BODY_VH028

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