

Heirloom Tomatoes



Photo courtesy to Democrat: Many gardeners prefer heirloom tomatoes for their taste.

Lilly Anderson-Messec is an FNGLA Certified Horticultural Professional and an employee at Native Nurseries, a member of the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension, <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/> For answers to your gardening questions, write Ask-a-MasterGardener@leoncountyfl.gov

Thursday, March 17, 2011

Tallahassee Democrat

Once again, it's time to start putting out your tomato plants. If you're hoping for a crop with the old-fashioned full-bodied tomato flavor like the ones your grandparents grew then your best bet would be to plant heirloom tomatoes. So what are heirloom tomatoes? And which ones grow best here in Tallahassee?

In general tomatoes fall into two categories; hybrid and open-pollinated. Hybrids are the first generation offspring of two distinct parents. A specific “mother” flower is pollinated by specific “father” pollen. The resulting seed produces a tomato plant and fruit that is different than either parent plant. This involves a lot of work and partly accounts for the high cost of hybrid seed. Hybrid tomatoes have been bred for uniformity, disease resistance and the ability to withstand mechanical harvesting, packing and shipping. Unfortunately this sometimes comes at the cost of flavor. The biggest disadvantage of hybrids in my opinion is that they don't come true from seed. This means you have to buy new seed every year. If you try to plant seed saved from your hybrid fruit, you will end up with an entirely different and unpredictable plant.

Open-pollinated tomatoes are varieties that have been genetically stabilized by someone patiently selecting desirable fruit and growing out generations of tomatoes. This usually takes several years, but once a variety is stabilized it will come true from seed. That means the plants and their fruit will be the same from year to year.

Heirlooms are open-pollinated varieties that have been passed down through several generations of a family or community because of their valued characteristics. These varieties are dynamic, that is they mutate and adapt to your environment as you save seed from year to year. Therefore the 'Cherokee Purple' your neighbor has been growing from year to year is likely to be better adapted to Tallahassee weather than the 'Cherokee Purple' seeds you order from a seed farm in Iowa. Ask your nursery if it gets its plants from local growers who save seed.

Heirlooms come in a myriad of colors, sizes and flavors. So what varieties of heirlooms should you plant? I like to plant a few tried and true varieties that I have saved and grow every year, along with a few new ones to experiment with. I am looking for tomatoes that not only taste great, but are productive and reliable enough to earn their space in my garden. Here are a few of my top tomatoes.

'Jaune Flamme' is an old French heirloom bearing abundant, early crops of 4-ounce fruits with bright orange skin. Its excellent flavor is a perfect blend of sweet and tart! They are delicious fresh in salads or dried. This "yellow flame" has been the first to ripen in my garden for the last two years.

'Speckled Roman' has gorgeous long red fruits with jagged orange and yellow stripes. These paste tomatoes produce heavy yields of 4-5 ounce fruit with meaty flesh and few seeds. They have a great "tomato" taste and are great for processing and fresh eating. They also store well once they are picked.

'Matt's Wild Cherry' small, red cherry tomatoes are packed with an intense, sweet and full flavor. Originally from Mexico, these large plants produce copious quantities all season. They are great for fresh snacking in the garden and in salads or pasta.

There are two more that I am excited to trial in my garden this year. 'Moonglow' produces bright orange 4 ounce fruits with a mild sweetness. 'Lemon Drop' is a yellow cherry tomato with a refreshing, tart-sweet flavor.

For more information on seed production and seed sources of organic vegetables, refer to this University of Florida IFAS Extension publication: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hs227>

###