



Heirloom Tomatoes **Melissa King 19/03/10**

Growing heirloom varieties has opened my eyes to the incredible diversity of tomatoes and the best thing is that you can experiment with so many types of tomatoes that aren't available in the supermarkets.

Why confine yourself to boring, round, red tomatoes when you can grow green, yellow, pink, red, white and black tomatoes in a diversity of shapes and sizes?

One of the biggest attractions for me is how incredibly ornamental these varieties are, not just in the garden but on the plate. This is reinforced by the number of top restaurateurs and chefs who are turning to heirloom varieties to spice up their dishes.

Interesting Tomato Facts

- At the turn of the 20th century more than 4,000 tomato varieties had been recorded. Sadly, many of these have now been lost.
- Tomatoes are member of the deadly nightshade family so when they brought to Europe in the 16th century, tomatoes were considered to be poisonous and were only used ornamentally.
- Theoretically, you only have to buy heirloom tomato seeds once, as long as you save the seed. Save seeds from the strongest, healthiest, most flavoursome crops.

Growing Tomatoes

Heirloom tomatoes are warm-season, frost-susceptible plants. In cooler areas, plant out seedlings after the risk of frost has passed. In cold areas, plant from September to November. As a general guide, in temperate climates plant from August to December. In tropical areas, you can sow seed into the soil in March – if grown in winter there's less risk of fruit fly attack. Plant them in an open, sunny spot. They need about six hours of sun a day.

THE TASTE TEST

Tommy Toe is the best one for my money! Loads of 6cm red or yellow fruit with an outstanding sweet flavour. It fruits from January to May. They rarely make it to the salad bowl because they're so irresistible picked from the vine. Also delicious dried or made into paste.

Green Zebra is tops for its slightly acidic taste and high yield, providing a steady crop of exquisitely striped fleshy fruit for up to four months. What's more, birds don't find the fruit attractive. They are ready to pick when the fruit is striped green and yellow.

Black Russian has a nice crop of firm, medium-sized fruit with unusual charcoal-coloured flesh. These tomatoes have a lovely rich, sweet taste and are very fleshy. They are great in salads, served dried and are ideal for sauces. They fruit for about four months.

Lemon Drop is a super sweet lemon coloured tomato perfect in salads or picked and eaten straight from the vine. It crops over a long season from January right through to May.

Tigerella lives up to its name with wonderfully decorative tomatoes that sport red and yellow stripes. The plant produces loads of small, round fruit, ideal for salads and tomato paste. This early variety appears in many regions from mid-December until March.

Jaune Flamme is a small tomato that's big on taste. Its fruit has brilliant orange skin that covers blushed yellowish-red flesh. A wonderfully decorative plant, this meaty old French variety is a joy to cut into. With its explosive flavour, it's a good tomato for drying.

Wapsipinicon Peach - Try saying this name three times as fast as you can! It's a very tasty creamy-peach coloured fruit covered by fine fuzz. The fuzz is said to deter fruit fly.

Brown Berry crops for months. It's a cherry style tomato with red-brown skin and rich tangy fruit. Rates high in taste tests.

Availability:

All of these varieties are available around Australia by mail order through the Diggers Club. Visit: www.diggers.com.au