

The Best  
Taste  
of Summer  
Just Got  
Better With

## Heirloom Tomatoes

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ONE OF THE GREAT REWARDS OF A FARM SEASON IS TASTING THE FIRST RIPE TOMATO. WHEN THAT BEAUTIFUL GREEN ORB FLAMES TO A BRILLIANT RED, PURPLE OR YELLOW, YOU KNOW SUMMER HAS OFFICIALLY ARRIVED.

**A**S CONSUMERS, we've become accustomed to the uni-

form, medium-sized red tomato on sale all year round at our local supermarkets. For the home gardener, though, the simple, red grocery store option will not do. Especially in summer.

Beyond the many delights of homegrown tomatoes, the delectable and colorful heirloom varieties bring another level of flavor and visual appeal to the table, and do this throughout the summer. After all, tomatoes are technically fruits—in the nightshade family—and should have the taste and appearance to prove it.

### HEIRLOOM HISTORY

An heirloom tomato is very different from your run-of-the-mill supermarket staple. Commercial tomato varieties have been bred to pack easily, hold up for long transport, and last for a week or more. These sad excuses for tomatoes have been picked green or pink, before their flavor has had a chance to develop. And commercial varieties traded away some of their sweetness for the convenience of uniform ripening. Sadly, their taste reflects these compromises.

Heirloom tomatoes, on the other hand, are varieties that have long been cultivated (at least 40 or 50 years) for their flavor and texture.

Often the seeds have been passed down from generation to generation with families saving seeds at the end of each season to cultivate the next year.

Because of the time and care needed to grow these exceptional heirloom varieties, small farms and home gardeners are typically the only ones to cultivate them.

### HOW TO GROW

Growing heirloom varieties can be more difficult than growing the typical hybridized form of commercial tomato, but it's well worth the effort. If you'd like to elevate your salads and sandwiches this summer, here are some tips.

The best soil for growing heirlooms is loose loamy soil. Southeastern Pennsylvania soil tends to be heavy clay, so amending your soil with peat moss or compost helps to create a better growing medium. That's a first step.

All tomatoes are heavy feeders, so adding organic fertilizers containing fish emulsion and kelp is a must. These amendments and fertilizers are available at your local plant nursery.

Heirloom tomato plants tend to grow large, so it's important to space them at least two to three feet apart when planting. Also be sure the plants are staked and trellised with string as they grow because they can reach five feet or higher! Support is essential for varieties yielding big tomatoes, often on small branches.

### SOME FAVORITE VARIETIES

There are many great choices for heirloom tomatoes. Some varieties produce better early in the season, while others are late-season performers.

My favorite first tomatoes are Early Girl, Eva Purple Ball, Arkansas Traveler and small cherry tomatoes called Sungold and Yellow Pear. You'll likely discover your own favorites.

Mid-season favorites are the ever-colorful Striped German and the granddaddy of them all, Brandywine, a tomato first bred in the Brandywine Valley in the mid-1800s and probably the best tasting tomato you can grow. Plus there's the extra pleasure of the local connection.

San Marzano, Blue Beech and Opalka are great late season tomatoes best suited for making sauce.

Each variety is unique in taste and appearance, so I urge you to plant one or two of each kind to enjoy a full complement of taste and flavor. And then you can host a tasting party (see sidebar).

### FINDING SEEDS AND PLANTS

Getting the seeds or plants to start growing your heirloom tomatoes is as simple as a spring



Heirlooms growing in the field.  
Below, 6 varieties: Blue Beech, Eva Purple Ball, Jubilee, Green Zebra, Brandywine and Cherokee Purple.



### TOMATO TASTING PARTY

With the bounty that a summer garden offers, there's no better way to celebrate the season than with an heirloom tomato tasting. Here are some tips for planning your tasting party. You'll want a colorful table presentation—a feast for the eyes—and a unique array of flavors of a summer harvest.

- Pick a late summer date when tomatoes will be ripe for tasting.
- Never, ever refrigerate the tomatoes.
- Set up a display to show off the colors and shapes. As for amount, a 1-lb. tomato can serve a few people, but count on more of the cherry tomato variety.
- Slice tomatoes and serve on a plate labeled with the variety and a description.

Place the whole tomato on the plate so the tasters can see what it looks like.

• Although most believe heirloom tomatoes are best served unadorned, condiments—salt (sea salt or kosher salt), olive oil, basil—may be offered. Along with plates, napkins and forks.

• Consider having a ballot (and pencils) for tasters to vote on their favorites and make shopping lists.

• Serve French bread or a hearty Tuscan loaf, wine and artisanal cheese plus a summer salad. Maybe throw something on the grill.

Gathering family and friends for a tomato tasting lets you share your garden and educate guests about the value of delicious home-grown food.



Ready for the annual heirloom tomato tasting at Willistown Conservation Trust

PHOTOS: WILLISTOWN CONSERVATION TRUST

*Rushton Farm, located at 911 Delchester Rd. in Newtown Square, sponsors a plant sale May 7 & 8, a CSA, a gleaning project and other events. The farm is part of the Willistown Conservation Trust Community Farm Program, committed to using conserved land to promote local sustainable agriculture. Learn more at [WCTrust.org](http://WCTrust.org).*

trip to the local farm market or nursery. Several local farms in our area specialize in heirloom varieties and take great care in nurturing and cultivating young plants.

Several kinds of heirloom tomato seedlings will be available at Rushton Farm's plant sale May 7 and 8, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. (911 Delchester Road, Newtown Square).

Even if you're not planting seeds this year, many gardeners enjoy flipping through colorful seed catalogs. Companies that provide great seed for starting heirlooms include Johnny's, Fedco, High Mowing and locally owned Happy Cat Seeds. Perusing seed

catalogs is the best way to choose varieties that meet your culinary tastes. There are many kinds of heirlooms and each has its own story, size, color and flavor.

Plants are easier to grow than seeds and should be planted in mid-May. And seeds can be started directly in the soil two weeks after the last frost, when soil is warm—about the third week in May.

Choose carefully for your garden but recognize that heirloom tomatoes represent the best that summer has to offer. It's the finest way to celebrate the season and the bounty that comes from a home garden. ♦

