

Heirloom Tomatoes

Heirloom tomatoes are tomatoes with a history. The seeds of these tomatoes have been passed down from generation to generation for many reasons. It could be their adaptability or vigorous growth pattern or maybe an exceptional flavor. Generally a tomato classified as an heirloom is over fifty years old, but many are much older. Some date back to the 1800's. Some heirloom tomatoes can be grown in our area, but a great many cannot because of our climate.

Some heirloom tomatoes that can be grown here, such as 'Brandywine', are indeterminate. Indeterminate means that all the tomatoes do not grow, develop and ripen at the same time. Brandywine is an old Amish variety, exceptionally sweet tasting and juicy. Brandywine has been around since 1885.

'Yellow Pear' tomato is also indeterminate. It is a small, yellow pear-shaped tomato which is great in salads or freshly picked from the vine. 'Yellow Pear' has been around since 1805.

'Stupice tomato' is also indeterminate. It does well in cooler weather and is an early tomato. 'Stupice' came from Milan Sodomko in 1977. It is called a survival tomato because it always produces and has very good flavor.

The 'Green Zebra', another indeterminate, is rather unusual. As its name indicates, it is a green tomato with dark stripes. 'Green Zebra' has a good acidic flavor and bears heavily.

These and many other heirloom seeds are becoming more available in seed catalogues. Of course you can also save your own tomato seed. Remember hybrid tomato seeds can revert back to either of the original tomato plants from which they were bred. If you save seed, the heirloom varieties are the truest seed to save. Tomato seeds have to ferment after harvest. Be sure to keep your different tomato seeds separate. Work with only ripe tomatoes and squeeze out the seeds and gel into a container. Barely cover them with water and mix gently. Set the container in a warm spot uncovered and please note that it will stink before it is done. Stir a couple of times a day for about five days. The fermentation is complete when mold covers the surface of the water. Pour the whole mess into a strainer and rinse until your seed is clean. Then fill your container with fresh water and the clean seeds. After a short time, the good seed will sink to the bottom. Pour off all the rest, drain and spread the seed in a single layer on a screen or in a dish or pan to dry. Don't put them in the sun to dry, but in a warm (70 to 85 degree) spot. Stir gently occasionally, until completely dry before you store them for next year. (Part of this information came from one of our fine northwest catalogues that specializes in heritage seeds.) There is nothing better tasting than home-grown tomatoes.

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