

Growing Tomatoes

By Karen Stephens
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Behind the tomato scene at the Master Gardener Plant Fair

Is the tomato America's favorite vegetable? One can easily imagine "yes" after watching customers cue up for Master Gardener tomatoes at the Skagit County Fairgrounds during the annual WSU Skagit County Master Gardener Plant Fair in May. Things haven't changed much since 2009, when Master Gardener Jason Miller wrote in the *Herald*, "When the [Plant] Fair opens at 8 a.m., you'll witness a very strange sight: Full-grown adults engaging in a barely restrained sprint for tomato starts, pushing wheelbarrows and pulling wagons in which to transport their treasures." Where do these amazing tomatoes come from and why are they so prized? Here is the behind-the-scenes look at a few of the many tomato varieties you can find at the fair.

More than 2,000 tomatoes are grown locally by a team of Master Gardener volunteers under the direction of "Tomato Bob" Bryan. A Master Gardener since 2009, Bob grows approximately 500 plants while guiding and supporting the other volunteers, each of whom grows about 150 plants. Bob may seem an unlikely tomato guru at first glance. His background lay in more academic fields such as engineering, psychology, biochemistry and biotechnology (where he contributed to the development of pediatric nasal vaccines for flu and strep throat). But from the time he was a kid, he liked to get his hands dirty growing tomatoes; a love he traces to his grandfather who operated a truck garden in California. Bob remembers his grandfather as an "irascible old curmudgeon" who lost the family farm in a dispute with co-inheritors. "But that didn't stop him. He asked permission to garden on city dwellers' parking strips and carried on."

Bob was mentored in tomato growing by the "Tomato Diva," as Master Gardener Judy Callahan is known by local Master Gardeners. Judy is credited with organizing and systematizing plant production. Additionally, she has trained hundreds of Master Gardeners, garden club members and Know and Grow workshop participants in the art and science of growing tomatoes. Her dedication is inspiring. One year, she was caring for 1,500 tomato seedlings when she received an attractive vacation offer. What to do? She couldn't hand over so much tomato tending to others, so she simply packed up all 1,500 plants and took them with her!

The "tomato team" is a collection of Master Gardeners growing tomatoes throughout Skagit County from Samish Island to Concrete. They are diverse in ages and occupations (from co-managing a veterinary practice to biotechnology entrepreneurship). One Master Gardener, who lives in Concrete, commutes to her Bellingham day job as a commercial real estate account manager and devotes her leisure time to her passion—growing heirloom tomatoes. Bob says that all Master Gardeners share a deep satisfaction in growing tomatoes from seed to fruit and pride in the vigor, quality and variety of the plants they produce for the fair.



Bob Bryan checks the health, growth and soil condition of tomato plants in the greenhouse several weeks before the Master Gardener Plant Sale. Lots of bright light, even temperatures and a light application of 17-17-17 fertilizer will encourage the plants to thrive; some will even blossom by early May. *Photo by Sandra Swarbrick / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

Which varieties to choose? That depends on how you want to use them. Bob says that cherry tomatoes, such as Sungold, Sweet Million and Gold Nugget, are popular because they are productive, tasty and easy to grow either in gardens or in pots. Bigger tomatoes, such as Early Girl, Big Beef and many heirlooms are great for sandwiches. The fleshy paste types— like Roma and San Marzano—are ideal for sauces. Bob adds that customers are increasingly excited about heirlooms, famous for their interesting heritage and superior flavor. This year we will offer ten heirloom varieties and 24 tomato varieties in all.

Bob, Judy and their fellow Master Gardeners will be available at the WSU Skagit County Master Gardener Plant Fair, May 11th, to help you select the right tomatoes and answer questions about caring for your plants.

Ultimately, tomato growing is an ongoing adventure and a life-long learning experience. No sooner have we “digested” the pleasures and lessons of this season than we eagerly anticipate the next, which—like the Mariners’—will be even better. We await the arrival of next year’s seed catalogs that will stun us with new tomato varieties that promise to be tastier, larger and more beautiful than ever!

Growing Tips

To grow your own quality tomato plants from seed, check out these tips from Bob and his tomato team:

- Air temperature is important. Germinate the seeds in temperatures of 70-85 degrees F. Grow the plants in cooler temperatures of 50-65 degrees F.
- Use a greenhouse or artificial lighting to provide the light that tomatoes need but is in short supply during Skagit County winters.
- Don't overwater, especially when plants are small. Tomato roots do not like to be wet. Give them sips of water, not long drinks.
- Water small plants with a dilution of 12-31-14 fertilizer (1 tsp/gal). Larger plants can be fed 17-17-17 fertilizer (1 tsp/gal).
- Repot the plants several times from seedlings in containers, to small plants in 4" pots, to vigorous plants in 1-gallon pots. Each time, bury stems almost up to the leaves. The stems will then produce more roots to soak up nutrients and provide plant stability.



Above left: One Master Gardener checks on her tomato production as she tenderly holds “summer” in her hands. **Above right:** Warmed by the sun, the sweetness of a cherry tomato is the summer taste that we wait for all winter. *Photo Credit: Christine Farrow, Skagit County Master Gardeners*

WSU Skagit County Master Gardener Plant Sale

When: Saturday, May 11
Time: 8 AM – 2 PM
Where: Skagit County Fair Grounds

Admission and parking are free with access through the **South Gate**.
For more information, go to: <http://skagit.wsu.edu/mg/plantfair.htm>

RESOURCES:

- WSU, King County Extension. Community Horticulture Fact Sheet #52. *Tips for Growing Tomatoes*.
- <http://county.wsu.edu/king/gardening/mg/factsheets/Fact%20Sheets/Tips%20for%20Growing%20Tomatoes.pdf>
- Cornell University Extension. Vegetable Growing Guides, *Tomatoes*. 2006.
- <http://www.gardening.cornell.edu/homegardening/sceneea10.html#growinginfo>
- Solomon, Steve. *Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades*. 6th Edition, 2007. P. 233-234 and 237-242.

