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# THE WSU ORGANIC STANDARD

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## Tomatoes!

I hope everyone has been enjoying the abundance of tomatoes over the last couple weeks! As with most of the warm-season crops, they are later in reaching maturity but are now making a strong showing. You will see a range of colors, shapes, and sizes in the tomatoes that represent the many different varieties grown at the farm. One of the smaller hoopouses at the farm is dedicated to just hybrid tomatoes with roughly 200 plants bearing most of our early fruit. There are another 70 plants representing four different heirlooms that are slowly coming on in the large hoopouse. Finally, the cherry tomatoes, yellow slicers, and cool season reds are all outdoors, another 225 plants. In all, roughly 500 tomato plants were started in the greenhouse on campus, cared for through the cold months of May and June, and then waited on until the end-of-summer harvest!

Obviously, we think it's worth the work and wait. Over the years there have been many trials of different varieties to find the ones that perform the best under our tough growing conditions and also look and taste great. Those two characteristics don't always go together and as we continue to look for suitable candidates to join our tomato team many taste tests must be made by our hard-working crew. By the end of the growing season we will have made the cuts for the year and decided which of the new recruits are worth giving another try next year. Their job description is tough: must handle early season cold weather, must ripen by August, must be prolific, and must look and taste great.

We grow both hybrid and open-pollinated varieties. By definition, heirlooms are open-pollinated and, usually, older varieties with some history. The four heirlooms we grow are now from seed saved at the farm, but their backgrounds are very different. One is from Eastern Europe, another from Mexico, and the others are from the U.S.

We try to save seed on all our open-pollinated tomatoes in an effort to have better acclimated plants that continue to grow well at our site. I've really seen a difference in our two outdoor slicers, the yellow Taxi and the red Legend. We've been saving seed on both of these varieties for the last two years and even in this strange summer they are bigger and better than ever before. Hybrids claim to have more vigor and productivity which is true in the ones we use but are definitely matched well by our open-pollinated varieties.

The watermelons for some unknown reason survived June as well and have put on a beautiful crop of delicious summer goodness! The melons have been fully grown for a few weeks but are slow to ripen. We will have at least one week of harvest and hopefully two for the CSA. Watermelons can be tricky to tell when ripe: we rely on looking for the tendril closest to the stem to dry before harvesting. This seems to be the most reliable method, but it never hurts to do some on-site testing. Both of our melon varieties have seeds but that's part of the fun for the kids. Have some seed-spitting contests just to make it interesting.

--Brad



You may have noticed a range in ripeness of the tomatoes we've received. Less ripe tomatoes should ripen within a week—you might place them in a paper bag, out of direct sunlight. When air is too dry, fruit softens prematurely; in humid environments, fruit quickly spoils. The paper bag helps tomatoes ripen at an appropriate, consistent, humidity. Below are more preservation tips, and a gratin recipe that makes the most of the beautiful yellow Taxis and red Legends, as well as the potatoes and onions that abound this time of year. The gratin requires a particularly long cooking time, but is worth it—it might be best to make on a day off this week.

--Jamaica

### Preservation Tricks for Tomatoes

While it's always wonderful to have canned garden tomatoes on hand as we roll into the cold season, not everyone has time to break out the Ball jars and pressure canners. Freezing and dehydrating are also convenient techniques. If you do want to try canning, a good resource is the National Center for Home Food Preservation, [http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/tips/summer/home\\_preserv\\_tomatoes.html](http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/tips/summer/home_preserv_tomatoes.html)

**Freezing:** Tomatoes can be stored in the freezer whole, sliced, chopped or pureed. In the past I've frozen simple tomato sauce in 1 or 2 cup portions (sauté onion and garlic, add chopped tomatoes and simmer. Cool and puree). But I've just learned about freezing tomatoes whole. Place raw tomatoes on a baking sheet in the freezer; once frozen, just bag them up. When you're ready to use them in a recipe that requires cooking, remove and rinse under warm water to slip off the skins.

**Dehydrating:** If you have a dehydrator, or have access to one (I borrow a friend's in exchange for some of whatever I've dried), dried tomatoes are delicious. Their tangy sweet flavor is just intensified in the drying process. Optimal temperature ranges for drying tomatoes is 135-140°F. They should be sliced about ¼-inch thick and placed on racks in a single layer. It will take between 10-18 hours for them to dry adequately. Properly dried tomatoes will be leathery and bendable, not brittle (overdone) and not tacky or "wet" (not dried enough). Store in air-tight jars or bags out of direct light..

### Tomato Gratin *Adapted from www.101cookbooks.com*

1 tablespoon fresh thyme, chopped	1 1/4 pounds potatoes
1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes	1/2 cup heavy cream
1 teaspoon brown sugar	2 pounds ripe tomatoes—combination of yellow and red, if possible
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar	a small handful of basil leaves, slivered
1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil	sea salt and freshly ground pepper
6 cups thinly sliced yellow onions (about 2 pounds)	

Preheat oven to 350°F and get out a 10 x 10 inch baking dish. First, caramelize onions: thinly slice onions and, in a large skillet over medium heat, saute 5 minutes; Add thyme, pepper flakes, and a pinch of salt, turn heat down a touch and stir in sugar and vinegar; Cook another 20-30 minutes, until onions are deep golden and a jam like consistency. Meanwhile, thinly slice the potatoes and tomatoes. Place sliced potatoes in a medium bowl along with the cream, 1 tsp.of salt, and pinch of pepper.

With a small, serrated knife, slice the tomatoes 1/4-inch thick, arrange on a plate and sprinkle with more salt and pepper. Smear half the caramelized onions across gratin dish. Follow with a layer of half of the potatoes then half the tomatoes. Pour a little cream from the potatoes over this and sprinkle half the basil. Repeat with a second layer of the onions, potatoes and tomatoes. Pour the remaining cream over the top and drizzle the remaining olive oil. Sprinkle a pinch of salt and pepper and the rest of the basil. Using a broad spatula, press everything down so that the cream comes up through the layers. Cover with aluminum foil and bake for 2 hours, or until the potatoes are completely tender throughout. Increase the oven temperature to 450°F, uncover the gratin, and cook another 30 minutes, or until the top is golden.