

Heirloom tomatoes: Joy or heartbreak?

Heirloom tomatoes are a hot topic this time of year. Fascinating varieties are being rediscovered all over the world to the delight of gardeners who are anxious to grow something special.

Heirloom tomatoes come in a brilliant array of colors from sunshine orange to emerald green. The size of their fruits can range from as big as a softball to as small as a pea. Some fruits are fuzzy, some are striped, and some have deep ribs.

All have fantastic flavor and this makes them worth trying for that reason alone.

The most popular heirloom variety is 'Brandywine', which is generally regarded as the best

tasting tomato. Other popular choices in North Dakota include the drought-tolerant 'Super Sioux', meaty 'German Johnson', and richly colored 'Pruden's Purple'.

Among small-fruited types, 'Yellow Pear' has a very mild, sweet tomato and is widely used in making preserves. The marble-sized 'Red Currant' is one of nature's richest sources of lycopene, which is reported to help prevent some types of cancer. For meaty flavor, 'Roma' still stands out as a tremendous tomato—its compact vines produce outstanding fruit for making paste, sauce and salsa. It may be the easiest to grow tomato variety.

I know Al Gore and his friends keep preaching to us about global warming, but summers in North Dakota remain brief and cool. This is where the early ripening varieties from Eastern Europe and Russia benefit us. 'Stupice' has exceptional taste, 'Moskvich' is cold tolerant, and 'Siberian' is extremely early. Some of the darkest tomatoes come from Eastern Europe, namely 'Black Krim' and 'Black from Tula'.

For something different, you might try 'Wapsipicon Peach', an heirloom from Iowa that is famous for its flavorful, fuzzy fruits.

You might ask, "If these varieties are so colorful and tasty, then why doesn't everyone grow them?" The answer is most heirlooms are difficult to grow. Many heirlooms are low yielding and not reliable. Many are susceptible to cracking and do not ripen uniformly. To be blunt, there is a reason why most heirlooms became heirlooms: *we developed better varieties.*



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Written by Tom Kalb,
Extension Horticulturist, NDSU
tom.kalb@ndsuh.edu

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A critical weakness of most heirlooms is their susceptibility to disease. Unless you want to spray your plants with fungicides on a regular basis—and nobody wants to do that—you have to do a better job of managing your tomato vines.

Give them full sun and well-drained soil. Give the vines plenty of room (space at least three feet apart within the row), support the vines with cages or stakes to promote air movement within the planting, keep the foliage dry when watering, and pick off diseased tissue quickly. Most heirlooms require pruning, too.

Personally, I think growing most heirloom tomato varieties is like trying to date the best looking girl in high school. She is definitely high maintenance and no matter how hard you try, she probably will break your heart in the end. In a similar way, heirloom tomatoes are definitely high maintenance and by the first frost, you probably will only get a few decent fruits. Granted, these fruits may give you an unforgettable experience (perhaps like a kiss on the cheek from your dream girl), but only you can decide if all the work is worth it.

If you decide the work is worth it, you can save seeds from year to year. Most tomato varieties do not need to be isolated more than five feet apart.

Many seed catalogs offer a selection of heirloom tomatoes, but if you really like heirlooms, send for the free catalog of Seed Saver's Exchange <www.seed savers.org>. Other notable seed sources include Baker Creek Seeds <www.rareseeds.com> and Seeds of Change <www.seedsofchange.com>.

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