

SELECTING TOMATO SEEDS

by: Helen Willoughby-Peck

It is a sure sign that winter will soon be over when seed catalogs start arriving in the mail. For those of us that love fresh, home grown tomatoes, pouring over those catalogs and dreaming about the different varieties that we will grow in the coming months takes a little bit of the winter doldrums away.

While it might seem a bit early to be considering tomatoes, this is the perfect time to start them from seeds indoors. Tomatoes are easy to grow from seed but do take a little extra effort.

There are several reasons why you might consider making the extra effort. Most importantly, it is the only way to get interesting and unusual varieties which are not available as started plants in nurseries. Tomatoes also need a long growing season, so starting them early indoors allows for an earlier and longer harvest period. It is also significantly cheaper to grow your tomatoes from seed. Tomato seeds can remain viable for many years, so your investment in seeds this year can yield for many years to come. Finally, it is just fun to watch your seedlings grow into mature plants producing fantastically flavored, colorful, interesting tomatoes.

This article, one of several to come from your local master gardeners on growing tomatoes, will focus on how to choose tomato varieties that are appropriate for your needs and help 'decode' some of the terms you may find in the descriptions of various varieties.

Tomatoes are commonly classified as either determinate or indeterminate.

Determinate tomato plants grow to a certain size and don't get any larger. They are sometimes referred to as bush tomatoes. Determinates tend to produce a bit earlier in the season and are a great choice for small gardens and/or containers. They also tend to produce their fruit all at once making them a great choice for gardeners that want to can their tomatoes.

Indeterminate tomatoes continue to grow with a vine-like habit throughout the season. They usually do best with some sort of trellising or other support and can produce fruit for several months.

Often you will see certain letters applied to a variety's description. These letters refer to the type of disease the variety is resistant to. So, for instance, if you've had a problem in the past with Fusarium and Verticillium wilt on your tomatoes you would be wise to choose a variety that has "VF" in the description. Here is a quick reference for the codes related to disease resistance.

A - Alternaria leaf spot
F - Fusarium wilt
P - Bacterial speck
N - Nematodes
T - Tobacco mosaic virus
V - Verticillium wilt

There are around 7500 varieties of tomatoes grown for various purposes. A few to consider for your garden are:

Heirlooms are very old varieties, sometimes brought to America from the 'old country' as immigrants arrived. They are any tomatoes that were available prior to WWII and the Victory Garden Days, that have been passed down through generations. They are popular because of their fantastic and varied flavors and beautiful colors and shapes. They are more susceptible to disease than varieties bred purposely to be resistant. However, they are diverse and fun to grow. A few of the more well know heirlooms are Cherokee Purple, Mortgage Lifter and Black Krim.

Hybrids are tomatoes that have been bred by choosing two different parent plants for their good qualities to get a better plant. For instance, a tomato might be bred for better flavor, color, ability to transport, disease resistance and so on. Most modern tomatoes fall into this category. They tend to be less prone to disease. A personal favorite of mine is Brandy Boy, a hybridization of the hardy Better Boy and the flavorful heirloom Brandywine, an over 100 year old Amish variety.

There are a few subcategories to consider:

Cherry tomatoes, as the name suggests produce small fruit which are great for salads. They tend to produce abundantly, so one plant is probably enough for a family. Sweet 100 or Sungold are good choices and are both indeterminate for a full season of salad tomatoes.

Roma or plum, sometimes called paste tomatoes, are bred for their meaty texture which is especially good for sauces. My personal favorite is Big Mama Roma, a very large, flavorful, prolific variety with few seeds.

Early producers might be appropriate to include in gardens at higher elevations because of the shorter growing season.

For more information on tomatoes varieties or for other home garden questions, call, or drop by the Master Gardener helpdesk on Tuesdays 9:00-12:00 or Thursdays 2:00-5:00, 5009 Fairgrounds Road, (209) 966-7078.

In our next column we will discuss the methods and materials for starting seeds indoors.

Mariposa Master Gardeners are pleased to be participating with The Mariposa Agri-Nature Trail in presenting a special event this fall; Weekend in the Country – A Tomato Fest. Follow our tomato growing tips in upcoming columns and grow your own great tomatoes.