

What's the Fuss About Heirloom Tomatoes?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It seems that if you pick up any gardening or cooking magazine now days, all you're going to read about is heirloom tomatoes. High end restaurants advertise that certain dishes aren't just made with tomatoes, they are usually heirloom (and often organic) tomatoes. It seems to be all the rage and with the ability to now graft an heirloom tomato onto a hardy disease resistant rootstock, the interest is apparently exploding off the chart.

So, what is an heirloom tomato? Well, good luck finding that description somewhere! Essentially, any tomato variety that was being grown prior to about 1960 would probably qualify as an heirloom. From a botanist's point of view, an heirloom variety is going to be a non-hybrid pure line tomato. Most of the tomatoes being grown today are hybrids. They are made from a very specific cross between two parental (pure) lines. If you take seed from a Celebrity tomato that you grow this year and plant it out next year you'll get something different. (My master's degree was in plant breeding so don't get me started on how it will be different!) If you plant a Rutgers tomato (first released in 1928) and save the seed and plant it out next year, you will get the same kind of tomato that you had this year.

Tomatoes have a broad genetic background. They are native to the northern Andean region of South America. There are over 1,500 different tomato varieties/hybrids available to gardeners today. Historically tomatoes were referred to as vines and they could grow quite large and ramble over a large part of your garden! The first hybrid tomatoes were developed shortly after World War II but didn't take off until the 1960s. Tomatoes are subject to many diseases so plant breeders have spent a lot of time developing disease resistant hybrids that were also more compact and fit better into home gardens. But many gardeners have long lamented that in this tomato modernization effort, good taste was left behind.

I'll be the first to admit that I still have a preference for the good old Rutgers tomato that my Mom always grew in our home garden. The combination of sugars and flavor just can't be beat, in my opinion, by any variety or hybrid on the market today. But like I said, tomatoes are prone to many diseases. The really devastating diseases are the soil borne wilts that can develop when tomatoes are grown in the same location year after year. This complex of diseases (the "V" and "F" often seen in tomato descriptions, i.e. "VFN resistant") was one of the driving forces behind the hybrids developed over the years.

Heirloom tomatoes can be found but you may have to do some searching for them. Specialty seed supply houses will often carry the seed, but finding transplants ready to plant out in the garden may take some work. Heirloom tomatoes are going to be more susceptible to all diseases so rotation of where you plant tomatoes in your garden becomes even more important and spraying fungicides for leaf diseases will be critical. Allow more room for these plants as they are often larger than the more compact bush type of tomato we are used to growing today. If you want to cage these tomatoes you better also find the heaviest duty cage you can find for the same reason!

Tomatoes are the most popular garden vegetable in America. Over 80% of all gardens will have tomatoes. Heirloom varieties are but one option for anyone craving this popular vegetable. For more information on tomato growing pick up a copy of our tomato bulletin at the Extension Office or online at <http://www.ksre.ksu.edu/bookstore/pubs/mf312.pdf>.