

Year Round Gardening

Tomatoes: Hybrid or Heirloom

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Some gardeners know what characteristics they prefer in a tomato and grow the same variety every year. Others browse through garden centers or seed catalogs and adventurously select new varieties. If you are the latter, one of your decisions will be to choose between hybrids or heirlooms.

Heirlooms tomato plants are generally known to produce better tasting fruit; however, they may be more prone to disease and thus require more maintenance. Heirlooms breed true which means the same characteristics are passed on from generation to generation. You can save the seeds from your heirloom Brandywine tomato each year without having to buy new seeds. Each time you plant those seeds, you will get a Brandywine tomato. Nearly all heirloom tomato cultivars have an indeterminate habit of growth which means they continue to grow during the season and fruit production is spread over a longer period of time. Growing heirloom varieties helps preserve the genetic diversity of plants and contributes to the overall health and biodiversity of our planet.



Photo courtesy of Debra Othitis

Hybrid tomato varieties result from the crossing of two genetically distinct parents. Commercially hybridized seeds are created to breed desired traits like flavor, texture, pH, size, days to harvest, or disease resistance. Hybrid tomatoes can be either indeterminate or determinate. Fruit production on determinate plants yields a concentrated harvest in a small window of time. This is ideal for those who are planning on preserving sauce or juice. Determinate varieties are ideal for patio containers.

First generation hybridized plant crosses grow better and produce higher yields. However, these seeds are genetically unstable, meaning that the offspring will not have the same characteristics as the parents. For example, if a gardener saves seeds from the hybrid 'Early Girl', the next season that seed would result in very few plants resembling the hybrid Early Girl. Hybrid seeds must be purchased annually to replicate the hybrid variety.

When experimenting with growing tomatoes for the first time, read the labels or catalog descriptions to choose the varieties that produce the results most important to you.

See <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/mg/gardennotes/717.pdf> to learn more about selecting and growing tomatoes in Colorado.

Colorado Master Gardeners Suggest These Varieties of Heirloom Tomatoes

Variety Name	
Amish Paste Roma	Wonderful flavor and dense flesh; good for sauces
Black Cherry	Intense flavors; produces abundantly
Black Zebra	Firm fruit with robust flavor; perfect for containers or beds
Goosecreek Black	Mahogany color; juicy, sweet with intense flavor
Mirabell aka Mirabelle	Flavorful yellow cherry tomato; early producer even at higher altitudes
Principe Borghese	Heavy producer; excellent for dehydrating
Super Snow White	Unusual, opaque, white-ish color; sweet flavor; good yield
Yellow Jubilee	All America Selection 1943 Winner; High yields of large golden-yellow tomatoes

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