

Anyone Growing Tomatoes?

by Al Chomica Part 1

Of all the favourite food gardeners grow, I believe the tomato is the most personal of them all. A lot of gardeners like the big Beefsteaks or Cherry Plum or Early Girls or they like to try any of hundreds of the new varieties and cultivars they are familiar with or wish to discover. Some people get very excited when going through the new gardening catalogues in the winter and can hardly wait to try new spiffy hybrids that come in every shape, size and colour.

We do things a bit simpler in our garden and stick to the varieties we have been growing over the years. By saving the seeds these varieties have become family heirlooms and we welcome the familiar sight of them as they ripen each year. It is like they are old, familiar friends that have returned to stay with us and nourish us for the summer. We no longer buy tomatoes from a store after the growing season ends because they just don't taste like tomatoes. If a tomato is picked before it fully ripens and is stored at cooler temperatures it will not develop the tomato flavour we are looking for. We also find them mushy.

About 15 years ago I could not eat any tomatoes, or any sauces or salsas made from them, without getting an upset stomach. It didn't bother me at all because the alternative was not eating them, which did bother me. But one year we were touring down in Arizona and I wandered into a garden centre, chatted with a tomato grower about acidic levels in tomatoes and ended up buying over a dozen strange varieties that somewhat turned me around. Ivory egg, Thai Pink, black, purple, orange and yellow tomato seeds were all brought back home to be sown. I found the orange and yellows had a low acid level which allowed me to explore the wonderful culinary world of using tomatoes on a regular basis.



Now, we only grow open-pollinated (OP) and our heirloom varieties so that we can collect the seed to grow them again. Did you know that seeds from hybrid tomatoes do not grow true? I had a heated discussion with the owner of a nursery who was promoting a new line up of hybrids. I asked why they didn't just grow OP or family heirloom tomatoes from tried and true varieties, but the comment was that if everyone did that she would go out of business! I didn't really like that response and have more respect for a plant that actually has a history behind it rather than one where a genetic scientist has intervened. Some of those hybrids may be good producers and look pretty, but if I can't grow the same tomato from seed, my eyes will glaze over and it will not find a place in our gardens.

Hybrid tomato plants combine two different varieties of tomato plant to produce a cultivated variety with beneficial traits from both its parents.

Some of the benefits hybrid tomatoes can provide, compared to non-hybrid varieties, include improved disease resistance, higher-quality fruit or a specific growth habit or colour.

The hybrid seeds are classified as an F1 hybrid. That is what seeds are called when they are manipulated through cross-pollination in a controlled environment. It also means the seed can't be used to grow the same tomato again. I've heard the big seed companies try to promote hybrids over open pollinated seeds quite vigorously.

As an example, the little yellow tomatoes shown above are volunteers that I allow to grow wild in our greenhouse. The seeds originally came from an F1 hybrid, called Sweet Millions, a few years ago. The seed grew these small yellow, tasteless tomatoes with a very thick skin that are almost inedible. Very seldom will a hybrid seed grow a prize specimen, but it can happen. Since I discovered that Sweet Millions is a hybrid, I now grow a similar cherry tomato, called Sweetie, that is open pollinated.

The grower I talked to about open pollinated seeds versus hybrids mentioned her tomatoes get cross-pollinated and she loses the variety over the seasons. I have seen some of my familiar varieties grow fruit with some of the traits of their different neighbours, so we just eat those. Every tomato variety we grow is completely different and easy to recognize by shape, size, colour, taste, striping and sometimes even the leaves. I only save seed from the best looking, healthiest and most representative fruit of the plant and have never had a problem with any of my heirloom varieties losing their uniqueness or getting watered-down. A trick to ensure no cross-pollination happens is to hand pollinate the flower stems by using a vibrating toothbrush type of tool. Once the vibration is turned on one can see the pollen falling down onto the same flower ensuring no cross-pollination takes place by bees or the wind.

Another trait about tomatoes I have just recently learned about is the difference between determinate and indeterminate growth habits. Determinate tomatoes, or "bush" tomatoes, are varieties that grow to a compact height (generally 3 - 4'). Determinates stop growing when fruit sets on the top bud. Indeterminate tomatoes will grow and produce fruit until killed by frost. They can reach heights of up to 12 feet although 6 feet is normal.

Tomatoes can be difficult to grow in some years. In 2017 we had the most pitiful crop around thanks to the cold, dark and wet weather in June and we had very little to make any salsa or sauce and the few we did get were all eaten fresh. This year we had well over 100 lbs and gave away buckets of them after making sauces, salsa and freezing oodles of them too. Lots were left on the ground to rot because we just couldn't give enough of them away, yet we shared them with at least six other families.

In 2018 we grew 12 different varieties of tomatoes that are all completely different from each other. We frequently challenge dinner guests with rating the best tomato from as many as 10 different varieties and have pretty much learned from these taste tests that each tomato tastes different and which ones are the most popular overall. We have specific uses for each one we grow and all of them are open-pollinated. Some are workhorses that beef up tomato sauce and some are breakfast favourites that are eaten in a BLT sandwich every day. A sweet cherry tomato called, Sweetie, is grown in a hanging pot on a post so that one can walk by and grab a tomato in their mouth in case their hands are too dirty to pick. We have a fairly organic diet from all the food we grow, and these tomatoes are right up there with the fruit and vegetables we consume on a daily basis. We have specific uses for these different tomatoes so allow me to showcase one of our proprietary specialities – cold-canned Triple Tomato Sauce.

This tomato sauce is made from three different tomato sauces that are all created separately and are only mixed together at the cooling down phase. It is a great tasting sauce that goes well, as is, on any pasta. When mixed with milk it makes an excellent tomato soup that tastes just like Campbell's. When mixed with clam juice it makes an awesome Clamato Juice to make Caesars and as I write the sauce is a mouth-watering base simmering in a pot of chili. We water bath can it as well as freeze it. After eating fresh tomatoes, it is the main product we make from our tomato crop every year.



This Triple Tomato Sauce starts off with three separately made sauces from 25 lbs of different tomatoes utilizing the best traits of each tomato. The first part to the sauce is to make a separate, rich tomato paste using 10 lbs of just San Marzanos and San Marzano 3 paste tomatoes that are chunky and have little water and few seeds in them. They are run through a tomato strainer to make a nice puree that is dried in the oven at low temperatures. This takes about four hours and 10 lbs reduces to about 2 cups. This is set aside as the next tomato sauce is made. This is a caramelized tomato paste that is very sweet and packed

with flavour. The paste one buys in a can does not even come close to the rich flavour of this homemade tomato paste.



A trick I learned to cut down on the drying time is to freeze the puree first. When thawed, the pulp and the water separate into layers and one can then pour off the surface water and just dry the pulp. This method cuts about three hours of oven time off the clock and is a pretty slick discovery.

The second sauce is made from 12 pounds of juicy heirloom tomatoes that are cooked for an hour with herbs, onions and tons of garlic in a pot. At the end of cooking time a large woody branch of both tomato and basil are simply dredged through the sauce for about five minutes until they turn a bright green and sweat out their flavours into the sauce. They are then discarded. This is a great sauce on its own, but the infusion of fresh basil and tomato take it to a new level. It has a distinct bold, smoky flavour imparted to it.



The last sauce we make to include in the Triple Tomato Sauce is made from three lbs of two of our most tart varieties. We strain the beautiful and very flavourful *Costoluto fiorentino*, which is a wonderful Italian Heirloom given to us by Linda Patterson. We combine this with another very tart tomato called the Japanese Black Trifele. These are not cooked at all. They are just strained and left raw. This raw sauce is extremely tart and fresh-tasting and is a very bright red. It makes one's mouth water after a small taste and is very powerful. All three of these completely different sauces, with their unique textures and flavours, will be combined at the end to come up with a single tomato sauce that is pressure canned without heat to preserve this tart, raw tomato sauce flavour.

The image to the left shows a tablespoon of each sauce. On the left is the cooked heirloom, infused sauce. In the middle is the tomato paste and on the right is the raw sauce. To cold can them the paste is mixed into the cooked sauce as it is cooling down. Sterilized jars and lids are on the ready and when the sauce has cooled enough the raw puree is mixed in. Then the sauce is immediately poured into mason jars with the hot lids being loosely tightened. Then the jar is inserted into a Food Saver vacuum sealer cannister and the air is sucked out of the cannister as well as the jar inside the cannister. One can see the lid pop down after the air is sucked out - and voila. Cold canned sauce that has raw, sharp tomato in it. I have never tasted a sauce packed with so much flavour. It is quite a unique, homemade invention.

This is the end of Part 1. Join me in another issue for a discussion of the different varieties of tomatoes we grow with lots of pretty pictures...

Anyone Growing Tomatoes?

by Al Chomica Part 2

Last Christmas my little cousin asked what kind of vegetables she should try to grow in her tiny new garden next season. My comment was that she should make a list of the favourite vegetables she eats during the course of a week in order to try to grow those. Of course, we discussed the lettuce, carrot, cabbage and onion options but then we got to tomatoes. I provided highlights on some of the varieties that we grow, and it became apparent that a small cherry tomato and a big, beefy heirloom would probably be the only two varieties she would ever need to grow. In this article I wish to share with you what I have learned from my tomatoes and how they enrich both our culinary experiences and nutritional requirements on a daily basis.

Some gardeners ask why we grow the particular varieties that we nurture in our gardens. A lot of it is by chance exchanges with other seed swappers or by other people who give us seed from varieties they have tried. Because we have all our own seed year after year, I am reluctant to start off any new varieties but will usually give a new tomato seed a chance to prove itself. Two years ago, our neighbour brought some seed from her 85 yearold Italian gardener friend from Calgary, claiming it was a great tomato. It was called, **Oxheart** and although I was reluctant to plant a new variety, it turned out to be a great tasting, good producer with a large, unique heart shape. It is now in our annual line-up.



Last year she brought more seed, which I didn't really want to try but I did. It was called a Sweet Roma, which I didn't even want because we already grow two other roma tomatoes. However, I did grow one plant that had large, robust and very sweet fruit that kept winning the blind taste tests with guests in our kitchen. Next year it will replace one of our other romas, the San Marzano, that is bland in comparison. Of the 12 different varieties we grew in 2018 my favourite is the **Costoluto fiorentino**. This is an Italian Heirloom tomato that was given to us by Linda Patterson. It is the brightest red of any tomato I have seen. It is very tart with a really nice tomato flavour and every fruit is shaped differently than the next. All those curves look sexy to me and one year I even took a dozen pictures of individual tomatoes to make a pinup calendar.

We grow these in our tomato patch but also start a couple off early in the year to facilitate growing them in a pot on the deck in full sun. This variety is one of the two tart tomatoes that we use to make our Triple Tomato Sauce that is cold-canned raw to preserve their wonderful flavour. If I could only grow one variety of tomato, this would be it.

When these tomatoes first ripen in June, they alter my diet and are consumed on a daily basis in Toasted Tomato Sandwiches until October. A slice of good bread slathered with mayo, topped with thin slices that are given a shake of sea salt and pepper. I pretty much eat these every morning from freshly plucked fruit and most times I will throw in some lettuce. If I am really hungry, it will get topped with bacon to make a BLT.

One of the varieties we will not grow next year is the **Black Cherry** tomato. It looks nice in a salad, but the fruits often split and get mouldy. It will be replaced by Sweetie and the Anmore Dewdrop, which is an early determinate plant that we grow in a pot.

The **Anmore Dewdrop** is a small red cherry tomato that is sweet and with a thin skin. It is a determinate tomato and only grows into a small size and perfect to start in a pot as early as mid- February. **Sweetie** is now our standard cherry tomato that replaces the Black Cherry. Perfect for salads and very sweet, I guess that's why they named it Sweetie. It grows in a raised bed close to the kitchen.



In the picture to the left are three different tomatoes. The red ones are **San Marzanos**, a traditional paste tomato. Although we like it, after this last season it was voted out in favour of a new paste tomato with better flavour.

The green tomatoes are very special with a sharp taste and unique colouring. They are called **Hotchkiss**, bought in Hotchkiss, Colorado many years ago. They get big and ripen slowly and add a lot of flavour to any sauce. When combined with big yellow tomatoes they make the most unusual looking bright green tomato sauce.

The purple tomato is the most tart of all the tomatoes we grow and survives the cold better than any of our other varieties. It is called a **Japanese Black Trifele** and has a black shoulder and dark fruit. It stands out from all our other tomatoes because it has leaves that are shaped like potatoes rather than tomatoes.

In this picture are three of our beefy workhorses that make up the backbone of our tomato sauces. The orange one is a **Mennonite Heirloom** that gets huge and is a wonderful tasting slicer. It has beautiful thin skin and if I could only grow two tomatoes, this would be my second choice. The red tomato with the pointed tip is new in our line-up and will replace the San Marzanos. It is a paste tomato called a **Sweet Roma** and was the common winner for the best tasting tomato during frequent taste tests. When dehydrated and turned into paste it was outstanding. The last tomato in this shot is the **Japanese Black Trifele**. It has a dark shoulder with an almost purple flesh and is the most mouth-puckering of all the tomatoes we grow.



On the scale is the **Ukrainian Heirloom**. We just call them, 'The Big Ukrainian'. We can a large batch of salsa every year mainly using this variety because we don't need many of them to make a 10-pound batch. It is the draft horse of the tomatoes we grow because it is very prolific, and the fruits are gigantic for an open-pollinated variety. Some years there are so many of these huge beasts hanging from a plant they split the tough branches apart with their excessive weight. They require additional staking. Two pounders, like the one to the right, are common if the plants are grown in a good organic soil. (Hmm, perhaps I should concoct some fertile soils and run an experiment to see just how big the Big Ukrainian could get next year. Stay tuned . . .)



One of our later-ripening tomatoes is the **San Marzano 3**. We normally have them fresh up until Christmastime although they start to get wrinkled after three or four months. We usually grow these under cover to enable the fruits to ripen at their leisure in October or even November. It is long and slender with a tight waistline and few seeds. In some of the fruits one might only find a half dozen seeds inside, which makes them almost a bit tricky to propagate because there is not a lot to work with.

The taste is somewhat bland compared to some of the mouth-puckering varieties we grow but it remains our standard for making tomato paste. It is also an uncommon Italian Heirloom that came from Linda Patterson. And for some reason, out of the surplus of the 12 varieties we traded away last year it was the most sought-after variety of them all.

Last but not least is the most unusual of all the tomatoes I could ever imagine – **Clare's Tomato**. I thought the Japanese Black was odd with its potato-shaped leaves and almost purple-black tart fruit. Or the Hotchkiss, with its green and red tinged flesh and huge size or even the Big Ukrainian that gets so big one almost trips over them in the garden. But this girl is known as a long keeper and indeed she is. A strange attribute to this unusual tomato is that it drops all its fruit when they are almost ripe and then mature off the vine over the next few months.

At the time of writing it is the beginning of February and we have three of these fresh specimens left. Although they look like they are still green, inside they have sweet, red flesh that tastes like a real, fresh tomato. This is the first year we grew this variety which comes from Prairie Garden Seeds in Saskatchewan – truly a keeper that has earned a place in our select annual line-up of open-pollinated tomatoes.

