



Heirlooms!

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The heirloom tomato has an interesting history. There is evidence that the origins of the tomato are somewhere in the Andes Mountains, on a wild plant with tiny berries that were pretty much overlooked. European explorers probably carried them to the Old World along with other plants they discovered. My own grandfather, who was born in Wales and immigrated to the U.S. in the early 20th century, would not eat tomatoes! He thought they were poisonous since they are members of the nightshade family.

Farmers markets are a wonderful place to see the abundance of heirloom tomatoes. They are usually laid out on stands showing their stripes and colors ranging from black, red, green, often with shades of pink. Some are dainty, others lobed and large, many are oddly-shaped and often asymmetrical. They don't typically show up in retail markets because of their irregularity of shape and color, but because of this, when they are in grocery stores - they fetch premium prices. For many, the price is well worth it, as they are among the most flavorful and tasty of all tomatoes.

Local nurseries usually sell starts offering plenty of choice for these scrumptious fruits of the vine. There are also a large variety of heirlooms available from seed, which offer even more choices. Of course, there are always plenty of tomatoes at the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County Spring Plant Sale held at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden in Placerville.

My complex, floral/vegetable garden is ultimately a tomato garden, because all of us eagerly look forward to the summer crop. Depending upon the weather and other mysterious factors, I can expect a glorious harvest or frustration and disappointment in a modest crop. Regardless, those tomatoes will be absolutely delicious.

Heirlooms are open-pollinated (by insects), producing seeds that can be saved to reproduce the qualities of the strain, provided the plant hasn't been cross pollinated. When saving seeds, choose from the best tomatoes available. The result will be quality tomatoes next season. In contrast to heirlooms, there are hybrid tomatoes which are the product of controlled cross-breeding of two different varieties of the same plant in order to produce the best qualities of the tomato such as size, disease resistance, yield, color, etc. However, if seeds from a hybrid tomato are saved, they will not reproduce the same tomato, but instead will resemble one of the parent tomatoes used for hybridizing.

By the mid-1800's tomatoes took off as an essential ingredient in many cuisines. Because of their unique colors, shapes, sizes and colors, and of marketing starting in the 1980's and 90's, many types of heirlooms were brought to the attention of the public, mainly at farmers markets. Then restaurants, especially upscale ones, began using them. Articles began appearing in newspapers and magazines, home gardeners were growing them, so the humble tomato grew up and appeared in coming-out parties!

Tomato aficionados sought out different varieties, families relinquished their precious seeds, neighbors shared, farmers and garden groups prized and traded them, and here we are today - the recipients of all those hundreds of seeds and plants from which to choose. The local markets may have only 5-10 varieties, but there are many available with names such as Hillbilly, Nebraska Wedding, Bull's Heart, Mortgage Lifter, Berkeley Tie Dye, Cherokee Chocolate, Ferris Wheel and so on!

If you wish to save your heirloom seeds, slice a great one in half, squeeze the pulp and seeds into a jar, wait 3 days for the mixture to ferment and have a white film. Seeds will sink. Rinse them and repeat if there is still any pulp on them. Then rinse and place seeds on a paper towel until they are dry and store them in a cool dry place. Don't forget to label what they are!

Join us for free public education class on "Gardening for Small Spaces" on Wednesday, August 8, 9:00 a.m. to noon, at the Cameron Park Community Center, [2502 Country Club Drive, Cameron Park](#). Master Gardener Mike Pavlick will cover site selection, design, raised bed options, container gardening, and other methods that will allow anyone to have a vegetable garden in a small backyard setting.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at [6699 Campus Drive](#) in Placerville, behind the Folsom Lake College-El Dorado Center. We're open 9:00 a.m. to noon, Fridays and Saturdays.

For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master

Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive

our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.