

If you enjoy growing heirloom tomatoes, you'll appreciate this useful guide to some of the tastiest selections in a wide range of colors.

BY CRAIG LEHOULLIER

# *a spectrum of* Heirloom Tomatoes

SOME SAY that we eat with our eyes. Ponder our palates' expectations if we are faced with colorless cola, an opaque glass of Guinness stout, or a handful of ivory-colored raspberries. The cola would probably seem insipid, the Guinness overpowering, and the berries lacking that distinctive brambly flavor. Yet a blindfolded taste test would probably elicit very different responses. The cola would taste typical, the stout quite subtle, and the berries as good as the best red specimens. We get what we expect, and what tends to be grown or produced commercially is what will sell.

As gardeners, fortunately, we have no such restrictions. So, rather than growing the tasteless tomato varieties usually found in supermarkets, we have a cornucopia of colorful and flavorful heirlooms to choose from. For this we owe a debt of thanks to organizations such as the Seed Savers Exchange (SSE), and courageous small seed companies that offer so many treasures despite the risk of customers saving seeds for themselves and reducing future business (see "Seed Savers Exchange and Heirlooms," page 36).

## DECODING TOMATO COLOR

When it comes to tomatoes, the external color is a combination of the flesh color and skin color. In fact, when sliced, pink tomatoes look exactly like red ones, and sliced purple tomatoes appear to be the same as brown ones. The unique combination of skin and flesh color defines the different categories into which tomatoes fit.

Although I was introduced to gardening by family members at a very early age, it wasn't until after discovering and joining



Heirloom tomatoes come in all shapes, sizes, colors, textures, and flavors.

the SSE in 1986 that my obsession with tomatoes went into overdrive. The tomato collection in my North Carolina garden now numbers well over 3,000 varieties, and my typical tomato gardens over the past decade have contained up to 200 different varieties, representing a mix of old favorites, mysteries, and breeding projects. Thus I have favorite tomatoes in every color, and discover new ones each season.

While lecturing about tomatoes, I get a lot of questions. One that always stumps me is when I'm asked which color tomatoes taste the best. Generalizing about the relationship between tomato color and flavor is tricky—especially when it becomes clear that there are all sorts of exceptions to those generalizations. A few common “urban legends” about tomato flavor are: red tomatoes are more acidic tasting, pink tomatoes are lower acid, pink tomatoes are sweeter, yellow or orange tomatoes are bland, black tomatoes are smoky or salty. And this is where I think many of us really do tend to eat with our eyes—or at least develop our preconceived notions or expectations.

Neil Lockhart of Illinois, who joined the SSE in 1994 and has since expanded his tomato collection to about 3,500 varieties, offers this perspective: “Some of the colors have lots of variation; many red and pink varieties can range from tart to sweet. To me, the yellow and red bi-colored types tend to be on the sweet side, the green-fleshed ones and purple ones tend to be generally delicious. White tomatoes seem to be pretty bland.” Yet other factors influence flavor. “I've found that all tomato varieties are pretty finicky, and there is a big dependency of how they taste based on the weather, season to season,” he says.

Carolyn Male is a familiar name to heirloom tomato growers through her long association with the SSE and her book, *100 Heirloom Tomatoes for the American Garden*. Though she has sampled around 3,000 different tomatoes over the years, her current seed collection numbers about 1,500. “If

I close my eyes, I can't see the color of the fruits I'm tasting,” she says. “The only relationship I experience is that the green-when-ripe varieties have a spicy sweetness to them, the so-called blacks have more of an earthy taste, and—with few exceptions—the white ones are rather bland.” In our many tomato discussions through the years, Male and I often chat about our favorites, and they populate every possible color category.

So with all of the wonderful varieties of heirloom tomatoes available, how can the average gardener hone in on a select few to take up their precious and finite growing space? To provide some guidance, I asked Lockhart, Male, and several other true tomato-growing, tomato-eating aficionados



The author considers the red variety ‘Nepal’ among the best heirlooms for flavor.

about their particular favorites. Hopefully our suggestions, organized by color, will help you narrow the field (for even more colorful choices, see the chart on page 38).

### REDS AND PINKS

Darrel Jones has been serious about growing tomatoes since 1987, particularly heirloom types. In 1993, he started selling a wide variety of seedlings through his mail-order and local sales company, Selected Plants ([www.selectedplants.com](http://www.selectedplants.com)). “My seedlings business provides a pulse of what does well where, around the country, and what is popular in different regions,” says Jones.

Typically, red tomatoes have red flesh but yellow skin, giving the tomato its scarlet tint. “Two red varieties, ‘Wisconsin 55’ and ‘Ramapo’, are popular in the upper Mid-

## Sources

**Johnny's Selected Seeds**, Winslow, ME. (877) 564-6697.

[www.johnnyseeds.com](http://www.johnnyseeds.com).

**Seed Savers Exchange**, Decorah, IA. (563) 382-5990.

[www.seedsavers.org](http://www.seedsavers.org).

**Southern Exposure Seed Exchange**, Mineral, VA. (540) 894-9480.

[www.southernexposure.com](http://www.southernexposure.com).

**Tomato Growers Supply Company**, Fort Myers, FL. (888) 478-7333.

[www.tomatogrowers.com](http://www.tomatogrowers.com).

**Victory Seed Company**, Molalla, OR. (503) 829-3126.

[www.victoryseeds.com](http://www.victoryseeds.com).

## Resources

**100 Heirloom Tomatoes for the American Garden** by Carolyn Male. Workman Publishing Company, New York, New York, 1999.

**Field and Garden Vegetables of America** (3rd ed.) by Fearing Burr. The American Botanist, Chillicothe, Illinois, 1988 (originally published in 1863).

**The Heirloom Tomato** by Amy Goldman. Bloomsbury USA, New York, New York, 2008.

**Tatiana's TOMATObase—Heritage Tomatoes**, <http://t.tatianastomato.com/wiki>. (Seeds sold at [tatianastomato.com/seed-catalog.html](http://tatianastomato.com/seed-catalog.html).)

west. Louisiana also tends to favor red tomatoes, with ‘Creole’ very popular there,” says Jones. Among his personal favorite red heirlooms are ‘Cuostralee’, a late-maturing beefsteak type and ‘Druzba’, a high-yielding mid-season variety. “‘Druzba’ is a red variety that has excellent production and rich tomato flavor,” he says.

“My favorite red variety is ‘Mayo’s Delight’ for its unbelievable taste, which is well-balanced between tartness and sweetness,” says Tatiana Kouchnareva, who at the age of seven began gardening alongside her grandmother in her native Russia. Soon after moving to the Pacific Northwest region of Canada in 1996, she discovered that the locally available tomatoes were not at all inspiring. Starting in 2001 with ‘Caspian Pink’ and ‘Purple Prince’, she embarked on a journey that now includes her own seed com-

## SEED SAVERS EXCHANGE AND HEIRLOOMS

Today's heirloom gardening enthusiasts may be shocked by the limited selection of tomato colors available in a typical seed catalog from the 1930s. The 1937 John A. Salzer Seed annual offered fewer than 25 varieties of tomatoes: 13 were the traditional red or scarlet, six were pink or crimson, and three were yellow.

Except for 'Purple Calabash', offered by Glecklers Seedsmen, no seed catalogs listed tomatoes that we describe as purple or brown—the so-called “black” varieties that are so popular today—until the early 1990s.

Tomatoes of many colors have long existed throughout the world, held within family gardens or farms and handed down from generation to generation. The origin of these varieties was likely accidental crosses, or even rarer mutations, discovered by observant or lucky gardeners and then lovingly nurtured and maintained through the years.



In all likelihood, many of these heirlooms would by now be lost to history were it not for Kent and Diane Ott Whealy, who launched what we now know as the Seed Savers Exchange (SSE) in 1975. Founded as a cooperative, the SSE, currently based in Decorah, Iowa, provided a collection point for unique vegetable and flower varieties, allowing for wider distribution through the sharing of seeds. The formation of small, heirloom-focused seed companies soon followed, facilitating the preservation and spread of these wonderful varieties far beyond the membership of the SSE.

So here we are, in 2013, enjoying a much wider array of choices for every crop than at any previous point in our gardening history. Gardeners today are fortunate indeed, as are those who enjoy the heirlooms available at farmers' markets, through Community Supported Agriculture groups, and at many progressive restaurants. —C.L.

pany, launched in 2009, and a Wiki-type database that is becoming a one-stop shop for reliable information on hundreds of varieties (see “Resources,” page 35). “I do perceive red tomatoes as stronger flavored,” says Kouchnareva. 'Mayo's Delight' produces large, heart-shaped fruit that is equally good for slicing fresh, canning, or making paste.

'Nepal' is the variety responsible for converting me from typical hybrids like 'Better

Boy' to heirloom (non-hybrid) types in the mid-1980s. Though these nearly round, medium-sized tomatoes look quite ordinary, they are among the best-tasting of all.

If a tomato's red interior is covered by clear skin, the tomato is described as pink or crimson. “Brandywine' is a favorite pink, which sometimes has low production, but the flavor more than makes up for it,” says Jones, who has grown it every

year since 1988. A mid-season variety with large fruit, 'Brandywine' is also a favorite of mine, and in a year that it shines, it would be hard to find a tomato with better flavor.

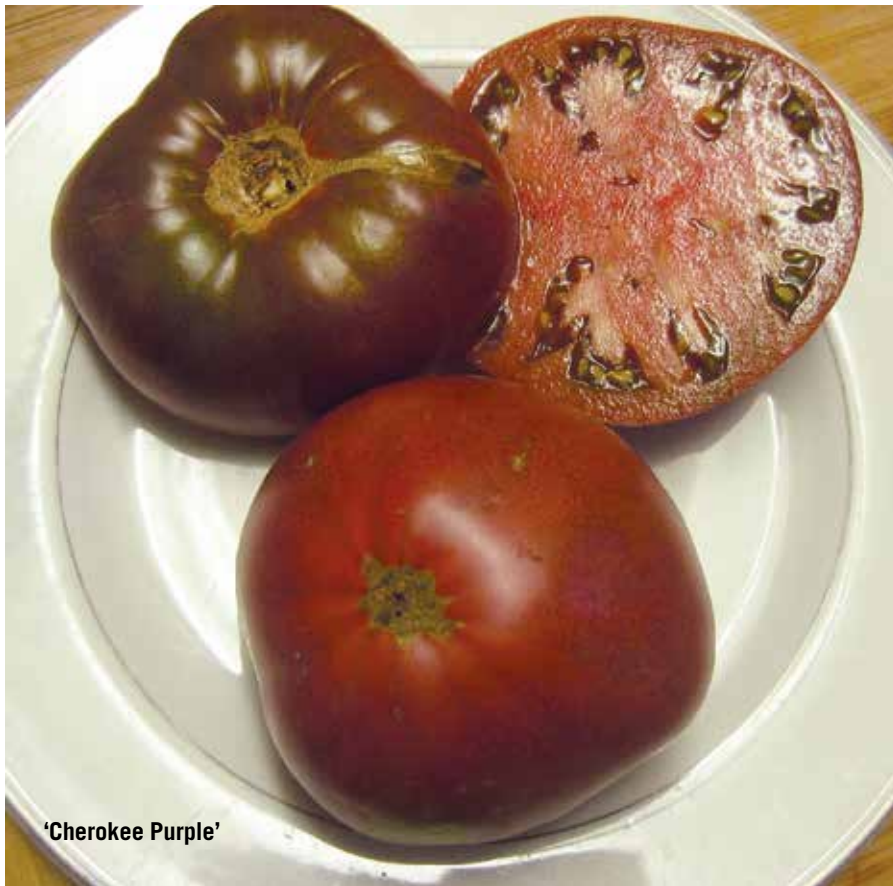
Long-time SSE member Jeff Fleming grows tomatoes in Augusta, Michigan. “Coming up with a favorite pink tomato is my hardest decision, because there are so many great ones to choose from,” says Fleming. One of his long-time favorites, 'Tiffen Mennonite' is a mid-season variety that produces well and has great flavor. Another mid-season variety, 'Snag's Pride', produces large beefsteak type fruit. “I've only grown 'Snag's Pride' the last three years, but it quickly moved to the top of the list, due to its wonderful melt-in-your-mouth flavor and good productivity,” says Fleming. Another great pink is 'Anna Russian', which Kouchnareva describes as “a pink tomato that never disappoints.” Its medium-sized fruit is heart-shaped.

### PURPLES AND BROWNS

If during ripening, a tomato retains some of the chlorophyll (green pigment) and the interior red has a much darker hue, this leads to a brown or purple tomato—some call these black tomatoes. If the skin over the darker interior is yellow, the tomato is brown; if the skin is clear, the tomato is purple.

One variety stands above all others of this type in my own tomato collection. In 1990, I received a letter from J. D. Green of Sevierville, Tennessee. He enclosed a





few seeds of “a purple tomato that the Cherokee Indians gave my neighbors 100 years ago. I hope you like it.” I named the large, delicious purple tomatoes produced from that seed ‘Cherokee Purple’. Seed was shared through the SSE, and sent to Jeff McCormack, who owned Southern Exposure Seed Exchange at the time. He told me that the tomato “tasted fine, but was kind of ugly—people may not like it.” Fortunately, McCormack carried the variety in his catalog, and people didn’t like it—they *loved* it!

In 1995, one plant of ‘Cherokee Purple’ produced fruit that was a lovely chocolate-brown color. Seed saved from the fruit produced the same brown fruit the following year, and ‘Cherokee Chocolate’ was born, having the same wonderful flavor, fruit size, and productivity as ‘Cherokee Purple’.

Two other brown varieties, ‘Amazon Chocolate’ and ‘Paul Robeson’, received kudos for their superb flavor from several of the experts I spoke with. The medium-sized, rich-flavored fruit of ‘Amazon Chocolate’ are produced over a long season. “‘Paul Robeson’ has that hard-to-describe ‘smoky’ flavor. Eaten fresh, it is okay, but in a salad with oil and salt, the

flavor really pops, and it has a lovely texture, too,” says Kouchnareva.

### ORANGES AND YELLOWS

Orange flesh and either clear or yellow skin results in orange tomatoes. Ted Maiden of Tennessee has a very special orange tomato

that he calls ‘Maiden’s Gold’. “It came to my grandfather in 1949, so it holds a very special place in my tomato collection,” he says.

A few other orange varieties warrant special mention for their excellent flavor: the pale orange-hued ‘Aunt Gertie’s Gold’ and ‘Yellow Brandywine’, and the deeper orange ‘Kellogg’s Breakfast’. All three are late-season bearers of large beefsteak fruit.

Yellow tomatoes have yellow flesh with either yellow or clear skin. “I love ‘Hugh’s’ for its consistent excellence” says Fleming. “Maybe it’s the Michigan soils and climate that make it so good here. In fact, ‘Hugh’s’ was a runner-up in the local taste-testing, so it isn’t just me.” It is a late-season producer of large, pale yellow, meaty, thin-skinned fruit.

‘Lillian’s Yellow Heirloom’ is my personal favorite yellow variety; indeed, it is one of the very best tomatoes I’ve ever tasted. It produces medium to large, sometimes irregularly shaped fruit with a meaty texture and few seeds.

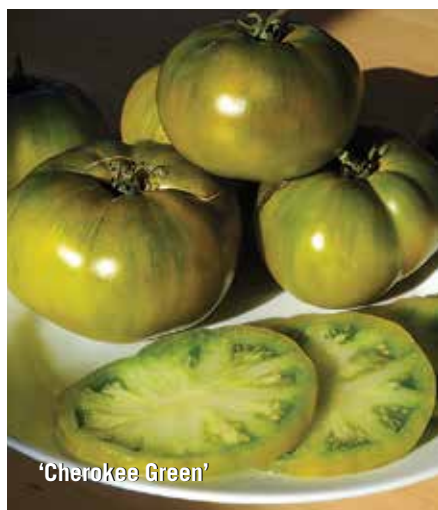
### GREENS AND WHITES

If the flesh retains its green color when fully ripened and the skin is clear—as is the case with ‘Green Giant’ or ‘Aunt Ruby’s Green’—there may be little evidence of the fruit being ripe save for a pale, pearly pink blush at the blossom end. If the skin is yellow, the external effect can be a rich amber color, as in the case of ‘Cherokee Green’. I tend to refer to both types as green tomatoes, no matter what the skin color or



## MORE GREAT HEIRLOOM VARIETIES

Name	Fruit Color	Fruit Size/Season	Comments
'Azoychka'	yellow	medium/early	refreshing tart flavor, from Russia
'Black Krim'	purple	medium-large/mid-season	full flavor, tart beefsteak fruit, heavy producer
'Black Prince'	brown	medium/early to mid-season	uniform, round fruit, flavorful
'Dr. Wyche's Yellow'	orange	medium-large/mid-season	very flavorful with a tart edge
'Ferris Wheel'	pink	large/late	beefsteak with sweet flavor and meaty flesh, excellent slicer
'Galina'	yellow	small/mid-season	cherry tomato, heavy yields, from Russia
'German Red Strawberry'	red	large/late	oxheart-shaped fruit, meaty and full-flavored
'Great White'	white	large/mid-season	good flavor, smooth-skinned, good yields
'Indian Stripe'	purple	medium-large/mid-season	heavy producer, exceptionally rich flavor
'Marizol Gold'	bicolor	large/late	yellow flesh with red swirls, beefsteak, good slicer
'Omar's Lebanese'	pink	large/late	huge beefsteak fruit, high yields, mild sweet flavor
'Opalka'	red	medium/mid-season	meaty, sausage-shaped fruit with few seeds, great for paste
'Pineapple'	bicolor	large/late	both flesh and skin is red with yellow streaks
'Wes'	red	large/late	good slicer, few seeds, heavy producer



external appearance, preferring the flesh color to determine the classification.

There is uniform passion among tomato aficionados for many of the green-fleshed tomatoes. Three dominated in my survey: 'Green Giant', 'Aunt Ruby's German Green'—both late-maturing, large-fruited slicers—and 'Cherokee Green', a mid-season variety with medium-sized fruit. A few years ago, 'Green Giant' was deemed the best-tasting tomato at an annual Midwest tomato festival. According to Darrel Jones, "Aunt Ruby's German Green' is a sweet, zingy tomato that makes me want to dance." And 'Cherokee Green', which appeared in a planting of 'Cherokee Chocolate' in 1997, has the excellent flavor and performance of its other two 'Cherokee' tomato relatives.

As for white tomatoes, most of our experts find them overly mild, verging on bland in flavor. White tomatoes result from

the combination of near ivory-colored flesh and clear skin. Only 'White Queen', with creamy white, meaty fruit, found favor with the majority of the group I consulted.

### SWIRLS AND STRIPES

Tomatoes can have combinations of flesh color, such as mixtures of red and yellow or red and green. These are called bi-colored or swirled tomatoes. The intriguing colors, however, are not always matched with great flavors. According to Maiden, "The large swirled yellow and red tomatoes are beautiful, with 'Lucky Cross' having the best flavor." Most of the experts I talked to tend to agree, though 'Lucky Cross'—which, full disclosure here, is a recent creation of mine—is not an heirloom...yet.



Another dramatic color combination in the swirled category is represented by 'Ananas Noire', mid-season variety favored by Bill Minkey in Darien, Wisconsin, who has "gone from growing 10 plants of different colors from fellow SSE member Thane Earl in 1991, to having over 1,000 varieties in my current collection," he says. Minkey finds the large green-and-purple-swirled fruit of 'Ananas Noire' to be truly outstanding.

In the striped heirloom tomato category, two varieties that stand out are 'Tiger Tom', a golf ball-sized red with gold stripes, and 'Pink Berkeley Tie Dye', a large oblate purple tomato with greenish yellow stripes.

### COLORFUL VARIETIES ABOUND

It is common today to feel nostalgic about the past. We may recall our grandparents' gardens and pine for the tomato varieties that grew in them. But we are actually very fortunate, because there has not been a time in American horticultural history when gardeners could choose from such a bounty of diverse tomatoes. Today's gardens can be the most interesting and fulfilling ever for those willing to go beyond the typical, ordinary, or easily found varieties. Jump onto the tomato color wheel and give it a spin. You may just find that your gardening pursuits will never be the same.

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