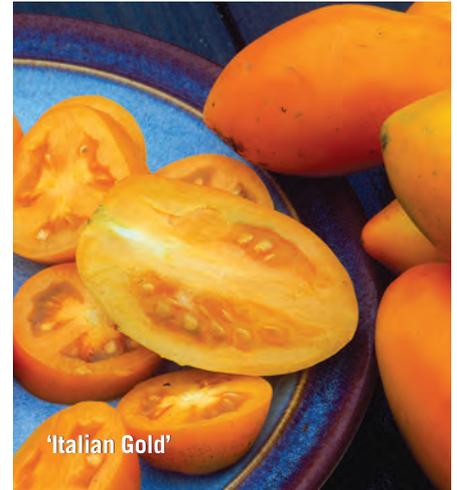
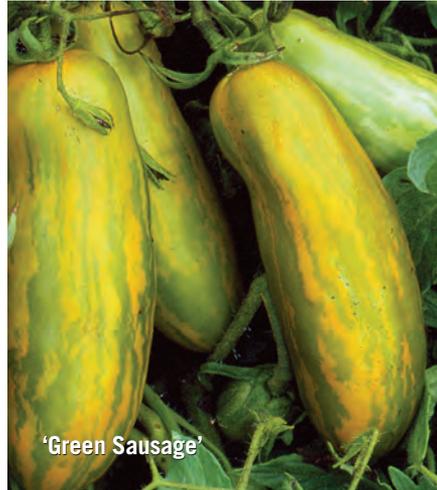


Paste Tomatoes Perfected

by Kris Wetherbee



AS A SELF-PROFESSED tomato gourmand, I have grown over 100 varieties and tasted more than 200 types. And while flavor is a big factor when it comes to growing any tomato, so is the texture—especially with paste tomatoes. Paste tomatoes (*Solanum lycopersicum*, syn. *Lycopersicon lycopersicum*) are noted for their meaty texture, low moisture content, and few seeds. That's what makes them perfect for fresh cooking, topping pizzas, and making sauces.

The best homemade spaghetti sauce has as much to do with how a tomato was grown as it does with the type of tomato used. So here's how to make sure your paste tomatoes come out perfect—or, at least, near perfect—every time.

GROWING GUIDELINES

For best flavor, plant tomatoes where they will get a minimum of six hours of direct sun a day. Mulching with a reflecting red plastic mulch (available at many garden supply stores) will help bring more light and heat to fruit. Staking, trellising, or caging your plants will also increase the surface area exposed to light.

Tomatoes thrive in a slightly acidic (pH 6.2 to 6.8), fertile, and well-drained soil. Enrich the soil before planting by applying

rock dust at the rate of 10 pounds per 100 square feet every few years. This is an excellent source for minerals, as are liquid seaweed and kelp-based foliar sprays.

The type of fertilizer you use is critical, because too much nitrogen can result in reduced fruit production and weakened flavor. For prime fruits, use a low-nitrogen (5-10-10) organic fertilizer applied at the rate of two to three pounds per 100 square feet before planting. Side-dress plants with well-rotted manure, compost, or organic fertilizer when the first fruits are the size of marbles. This helps air and water to better

penetrate the soil and gives roots easier access to flavor-enhancing minerals.

Water deeply and consistently so soil moisture stays even. Too much water dilutes the flavor of tomatoes; too little will inhibit flavor production. Mulch plants to help maintain moisture levels and reduce problems such as fruit cracking and blossom-end rot. Reduce watering once fruits reach full size and begin to change color.

PEST AND DISEASE PREVENTION

Cornworms, whiteflies, flea beetles, and aphids are the most common tomato pests.

Planting Basics

GETTING STARTED Sow seeds indoors six to eight weeks before your last spring frost. Seeds germinate best at temperatures between 75 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Pot up seedlings into four-inch pots when the first set of true leaves emerge. For earlier yields, transplant once more into gallon-size pots when seedlings are about six inches tall. Research has shown that periodically brushing the tops of developing seedlings lightly with your hands will result in larger and stockier transplants.

SPACING Set out transplants into the ground after frost danger has passed, about 12 to 24 inches apart for determinate varieties; 24 to 36 inches for indeterminate, un-staked varieties; and 15 to 24 inches for staked, caged, or trellised plants. Snip off the lowest sets of leaves and plant the bulk of the stem below the surface. New roots will form along the buried stem, encouraging a healthier and faster-growing plant.

DAYS TO MATURITY 55 to 110 days from transplant, depending on the variety, age of seedlings, and growing conditions.

Control aphids with an insecticidal soap, blasting them with water, or by introducing lacewings and/or lady beetles. Prevent flea beetles from feeding on foliage by growing young plants beneath row covers, dusting plants with diatomaceous earth, or introducing beneficial nematodes into your soil to feed on the larvae and pupae of these pests. Wipe out whiteflies with insecticidal soap or horticultural oil. Hosing down plants and introducing natural predators such as lady beetles, lacewings, or whitefly parasites (tiny parasitic wasps) is also effective. Hornworms are easily controlled by hand picking or dusting plants with Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), a biological control that is toxic to caterpillars.

Blossom-end rot is a common problem characterized by sunken brown areas of decayed tissue forming around the bottom of fruits. Caused by a calcium deficiency, this condition is exacerbated by moisture fluctuations, which can interfere with calcium uptake. Incorporate crushed eggshells or oyster shells into the soil to prevent calcium imbalance and mulch to ensure more consistent soil moisture.

Sources

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

www.johnnyseeds.com.

Territorial Seed Company, Cottage Grove, OR. (800) 626-0866.

www.territorialseed.com.

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

www.tomatogrowers.com.

Totally Tomatoes, Randolph, WI. (800) 345-5977. www.totallytomato.com.

Ultimately, the best strategies for warding off tomato pests and diseases are to select pest- and disease-resistant varieties, provide the right conditions to grow a healthy plant, and grow flowering plants nearby that encourage beneficial insects.

RECOMMENDED VARIETIES

'Super Marzano' and 'Italian Gold' are both prolific and high in pectin, lending a natural creaminess to sauces and pastes. 'San Marzano', 'Opalka', and 'Sausage'

are also very prolific and meaty—great for canning or making spaghetti sauce. 'Granadero', 'Viva Italia', 'Margherita', 'Kada', and 'Saucy' all offer great tomato flavor on disease-resistant vines. For uniquely colored or striped fruits, try 'El Dorado', 'Roman Candle', 'Green Sausage', or 'Speckled Roman'.

ENJOYING THE HARVEST

Harvest fruits only when they are semi-firm and the color has almost fully developed. Tomatoes picked a few days before they are fully ripe and allowed to sit on the kitchen counter a day or two are typically more flavorful than really ripe tomatoes plucked from the vine when soft.

It's best to store your tomatoes in a single layer in a cool location in your kitchen. Never store tomatoes in the refrigerator, because chilling will reduce sweetness and overall flavor and lead to a mushy texture.

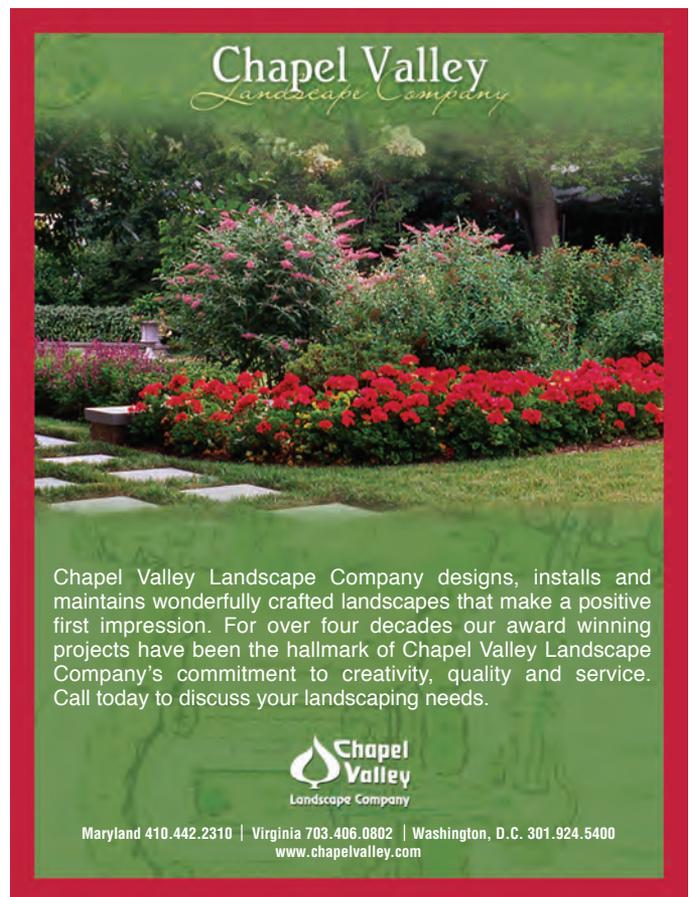
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