

## Varieties

At the festivals we attended, everyone—from passionate vegetable gardeners to casual weekenders out for a good time—seemed intent on ferreting out the best-of-show tomato, something with flavors more rich and complex than the finest wine. Everyone, that is, except the chefs who were preparing tomato-based foods for festivalgoers to eat. Judged by the dishes they offered, these cooks were as interested in color and shape as in flavor, offering salads spangled with yellow, red, and orange cherry tomatoes, and basil-sprinkled, olive-oiled slabs of white, pink, green, and crimson tomatoes layered with thin slices of sweet onions.

It seems that presentation counts for a great deal more when tomatoes are prepared for eating, especially in light of the ways in which their flavors change when combined with other ingredients. A little salt can enliven a bland tomato, and seasonings such as basil flakes and salad dressings can completely alter the flavor of the tomatoes they dress. Cut up into salsa, a tomato's original flavor fades well into the background, overpowered by cilantro, garlic, onions, peppers, and salt.

With all these things in mind, we offer our spring list of great varieties. All have memorable flavors, a few are sculptural beauties, and some are downright ugly. But each one is worth growing.

### Slicers

Every gardener needs at least one tomato variety that's big enough to slice onto hamburgers and sandwiches, and to fan out on deli trays.

'**Brandywine**' is a hands-down favorite. The original, a pink beefsteak type, can weigh 1½ pounds per fruit. It has big flavor to match, and a unique, melt-in-your-mouth softness to the flesh. It also grows in red, yellow, and black versions, but the original is still most favored. A wonderful lighter pink is '**Odoriko**', a Japanese hybrid with perfect balance between sweet and acid flavors.

'**Paul Robeson**' stands out among several great black tomatoes. Most appear tinged with black, brown, or purple, skin and flesh included. They tend to be richly flavored, sometimes with hints of spice or red wine, and they vary widely in size. 'Paul Robeson' weighs about 10 to 12 ounces. For an outstandingly rich black variety, try '**Cherokee Purple**', whose fruit often grows to 10 ounces or more. '**Black Prince**', from Siberia, is on the small end of the scale for black tomatoes; it's flavorful and juicy, and can be sweet when it gets enough summer heat.

Grow '**Earl of Edgcombe**' for its firm and meaty texture, superb flavor, and gold-orange skin and flesh. It is also remarkably disease-free. '**Flammé**', a French heirloom, is only half the diameter of 'Earl of Edgcombe' but has a deeper, persimmon orange skin and nicely balanced sweetness.

Among the classic reds, '**Dona**' is a medium-size French hybrid that was bred for the fresh market, where flavor is at a premium; plants produce liberally. '**Costoluto Genovese**' and '**Charlie Chaplin**' have fluted sides that make them tough to peel but great for stuffing or slicing. Of the two, the heat-loving 'Costoluto Genovese' has the most fluting and is probably better for eating, with a meaty, full-flavored, slightly tart interior. '**Stupice**', a Czech variety that's modest in size and cold-tolerant, does particularly well along the coast and in other mild-summer climates.

'**Green Zebra**' is an heirloom open-pollinated variety that comes true from seed. Its golden yellow base is covered with green stripes, and flavor is on the tart side, too green for some. '**Tigerella**' (also called 'Mr. Stripey') has met with better reviews for flavor. It's also on the small side, with yellowish stripes over a red base.

There are also a couple of great yellows worth noting: the huge (up to 2-pound) '**Pineapple**' (yellow with peach blush) and '**Nebraska Wedding**'. Though they aren't pictured here, they placed highly in tastings.

### Cherries

Productive and easy, cherry tomatoes look great in salads, especially when colors are mixed. Beautifully bite-size, they make perfect appetizers to serve with dip.

If there was a consensus winner for flavor among all tomatoes, it was '**Sun Gold**'. In theory, the best tomato should have a good balance of sweetness and acidity, but nearly everyone who tasted this one simply lit up with delight. Forget the theories: This one's sweet as candy.

'**Isis Candy**' is a sweet red cherry that received almost as much praise as 'Sun Gold'. And if you'd like to drop a yellow into the mix, grow the mild, beautifully pear-shaped '**Yellow Pear**'. Some rated it highest among the cherries.

### Paste tomatoes

Good paste tomatoes are seedless (or nearly so), meaty, and on the dry side—qualities that also tailor them perfectly to sauces and sun-drying. Some have good enough flavor to be used (and sold in supermarkets) as slicers.

'**Roma**' is the classic paste tomato, but in the tastings we attended, full-flavored '**San Marzano**' and sweet '**Viva Italia**' came out ahead. At 3½ inches long, 'San Marzano' is bigger than 'Roma' and has some resistance to late blight. 'Viva Italia' is a determinate type (it grows to a certain height, then stops), so all the fruit comes to harvest at about the same time. (That's a clear advantage for anyone who wants to do all their harvesting and canning on the same weekend.) And it's very sweet and disease-resistant. '**Principe Borghese**' is particularly favored as a drying tomato.

*(Continued on page 128)*