

Tony A. Glover

Question: Where can I find “Heirloom Tomatoes” to plant in my home garden?

Answer: When I took on the task of answering this question it became obvious that the topic is confusing to gardeners and deserves some attention. Some people appear to be working under an erroneous assumption about what an “Heirloom Tomato” is or is not. I will attempt to clarify as much as possible. First, “Heirloom Tomato” is not a variety of tomato you can go to the garden center and ask for by that name alone. Second, “Heirloom Tomatoes” are a group of varieties whose seeds have been passed down from generation to generation.

Heirloom varieties are not hybrids like many modern varieties. They are open pollinated and have been around for at least 50 years as stable named varieties. Open pollinated means they come back from saved seed and look (and taste) like the original plant (and fruit). They often come back true to the parent even when near other tomatoes because they don’t cross pollinate easily. This trait meant tomatoes were passed from family member to family member within a community over long periods of time relatively unchanged. There are many “new” (to America) heirloom varieties coming from eastern European countries since the fall of the iron curtain. They were saved over multiple generations and are just now getting wider distribution.

Heirloom tomatoes have become more popular as people seek out better and unique flavors. They come in many colors, shapes and sizes that are grown both for flavor and novelty. Often times their history or uniqueness is reflected in their name. For example, “Jeff Davis” is an old Alabama heirloom variety originating here in the late 1800’s and “Brandywine” is a popular heirloom variety that originated in Chester County, Pennsylvania where it was named for Brandywine creek. Some varieties have interesting stories behind their name such as “Mortgage Lifter”. The story goes that a West Virginian who fell on hard times during the Great Depression selected out this very large fruited variety and sold enough plants over a four year period to pay off his home mortgage.

I recently spoke with Arnold Caylor who is the director of the North Alabama Horticulture Research substation in Cullman. Arnold said he and Regional Extension Agent, Dan Porch looked at several heirloom varieties last summer and plan to look at some again this year. In general they found most varieties were more prone to disease, fruit rots and fruit cracking than newer varieties and yields were less than most hybrids but there were some interesting and good tasting fruit. He said he would plant two varieties called “Mexico” and “Azoychka” in his personal garden this year because he liked them so much. “Mexico” produces a large, meaty, dark pink fruit that was good fresh and for cooking. “Azoychka” is a Russian variety that produces early, medium sized fruit with a yellow color and a hint of citrus flavor.

Finding plant sources of a good selection of heirloom varieties is difficult. Ask your supplier if they have any of the heirloom types and get on the internet and search out

information about the varieties they sell. You can also find seed sources easily on the internet and then grow your own plants. Don't expect retailers to handle all of these obscure varieties. If you want to try something out of the ordinary you will have to do a little extra work and research on your own.