

SELECTING THE RIGHT TOMATO

The best tasting and safest tomatoes are available in your own backyard. Visit the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) website www.aces.edu for the latest information on tomatoes, home gardening, food preservation and food safety.

America's favorite vegetable, it's really a fruit, but that's another story, is the tomato. There are more than 6,000 named varieties of tomato available to today's gardeners. They range from tiny cherry tomatoes ½ inch in diameter (Wild Cherry, Tiny Tim) to large heirloom varieties weighing 2 pounds or more (German Giant, Goliath). Their ripe colors include red, pink, yellow, black, white, green, purple, orange and bi-colors with red and green or yellow and red. There are varieties for canning, paste, salad, stuffing and best of all, for eating fresh in a tomato sandwich with mayonnaise, salt and pepper. With all these varieties to choose from, how does a gardener decide which ones to plant?

THE BASICS

GROWTH HABIT – The growth habits of tomato plants are classified as determinate or indeterminate. Determinate tomatoes are sometimes called bush tomatoes. They grow to a height determined by their genetic makeup and then produce a cluster of flowers at the growing tip of the plant. The flowers along the plant stem and top open and set fruit within a few weeks time. Determinate varieties are good choices for canning or when there is a need to harvest a crop in a short period of time. Examples of determinate tomato varieties are Celebrity, Rutgers and Roma.

Indeterminate tomato varieties do not set terminal flower clusters, only lateral ones. These tomatoes will continue to grow in height and produce new flowers and fruit as long as growing conditions are favorable. Most older varieties are indeterminate as well as many newer ones. In Alabama indeterminate varieties can produce ripe fruit on the same plant from June until November.

DISEASE RESISTANCE – Disease resistance is indicated by the addition of one or more letters after the name of the tomato variety. The most common letters are: (V) verticillium wilt, (F) fusarium wilt, (N) nematodes, (T) tobacco mosaic virus and (A) alternaria. There are no tomato varieties resistant to all diseases. Plant disease resistance does not mean that a particular plant will not acquire disease, only that it will tolerate disease better than a plant without resistance.

TRANSPLANT TO HARVEST DAYS – Tomato varieties can be classified as early season, mid-season and late season based on the number of days from setting out of plants until first fruit can be harvested. Early season varieties range from 50 or fewer days to 69 days. Examples are Early Girl – 54 days or Quick Pick – 60 days. Mid-season varieties range from 70 days to 79 days. Examples are Celebrity – 70 days and Better Boy, 75 days. Late varieties require 80 days or more to ripen fruit. Examples are Ace – 80 days and Arkansas Traveler – 85 days. Most early varieties will not bear well when summer temperatures are at their peak. The actual number of days it takes a particular variety to produce a crop will vary from garden to garden according to the weather, soil temperature, date of transplant and amount of light available.

HEIRLOOM OR HYBRID – Heirloom tomatoes can be family treasures passed along to each new generation of gardeners or commercial heirlooms bought and maintained by seed companies. In either case, from a reproductive standpoint, they are open-pollinated. This means that seeds from plants raised in isolation from other tomatoes will give the same variety from year to year unless spontaneous mutations occur.

Hybrid tomatoes have different parents and are combined to create varieties with specific traits for diseases resistance, fruit size and quantity, compact growth habit or other desirable plant characteristics. Saving seed from hybrid plants will not produce the original variety. There are many good heirloom varieties just as there are many good hybrid varieties.

USES – Tomato varieties have been developed for a variety of uses. These include fresh eating – Brandywine, paste - San Marzano, salad tomatoes with small fruit – Juliet, stuffing - Burgess stuffing and canning – Rutgers. Experience is the best guide for choosing these tomatoes for their intended uses.

TASTE – The best tasting tomatoes come from your backyard. Commercial growers have limitations on the type of tomatoes they grow. Commercial varieties emphasize yield, disease resistance, ability to ship, fruit uniformity, freedom from blemishes, shelf-life and ease of harvest. Commercial varieties are picked with only a hint of red color so that the shelf-life is extended. Backyard growers are more concerned with flavor and texture than blemishes or fruit uniformity. They can choose varieties that are acid or sweet and keep them on the vine until flavor is at its peak.