



Season 2 Episode 2 – Tomato Topics

January 24, 2023

Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Farming Basics Podcast with Olivia Fuller. We'll have sustainable farming tips from growers across the state and extension specialists at Auburn University.

Olivia Fuller:

We're back. It's your host, Olivia Fuller. And Jacob Kelly is still not with me again today, but he will be back. Don't worry. We've got Dr. Chip East with us today. He is what? Jacob and I are in the east set of the state. So he's the commercial horticulture agent over in this area. We're recording an Auburn today and we are so happy to have him.

Chip East:

Good to be here. Olivia.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah, we're going to talk about tomato selection and why variety's important. And I mean tomatoes, we all love them, but there's so many things that go into planting tomatoes. I'm sure there's a lot of failed gardeners that are listening to this right now that they're tomatoes got diseased and maybe you've chose the wrong tomato that you're just like, this doesn't taste great. So why is that? Why are there so many varieties of tomatoes as opposed to other vegetables?

Chip East:

There are thousands and thousands of different cultivars or types of tomatoes to choose from. And when you're going through those seed catalogs, it can be fun, but it can actually be confusing as well because why would you plant one over another? Obviously you want to plant the best. So if there was one that was the best, that's all we'd plant. We wouldn't plant any of the others. They all have different characteristics and it depends on what you're looking for as to which one we would plant.

Olivia Fuller:

So talking about the Southeast here, it gets super hot in the summers when they're trying to set fruit. Is there a few that you can name that are great for our environment that's recommended just for Alabama specifically?

Chip East:

And that's one thing to think about. We can plan a lot of things early in the spring, but a lot of times when it gets in the nineties and especially a hundred degrees or in that neighborhood, they'll shut down. They won't set fruit. And there are some heat-set tomatoes and sometimes you can tell and it'll say that on the seed package, it'll say if it's a heat-set tomato and sometimes it tells you in the name, like it'll say solar fire or sun chaser would be Phoenix is one of the heat-set tomatoes, but there's one called Bella Rosa. It's a heat-set tomato, but I can't really tell from the name that-

Olivia Fuller:

But it would say that on the package?

Chip East:

It would tell you on the package if it's a heat-set. Now we might plant a lot of things in the spring, but for those crops that's going to be coming in, those tomatoes, that's going to be setting fruit in August. I would probably want some, a few heat-set ones in the garden, the others will come back in and start setting fruit again as it cools off. But that hot time of year, I'd like to have some heat-set tomatoes planted.

Olivia Fuller:

So that brings up determinate versus indeterminate. Another way to narrow your selection.

Chip East:

Well that's a good question. And on the indeterminate and determinate. And sometimes it depends on how our staking methods, I mean tomato is a vining crop, so we've got to stake it in some way. A determinate tomato, and a lot of the farmers grow determinate tomatoes, but anybody can grow them. They grow, bloom, set fruit and they're pretty much done. They don't have that continual growth like an indeterminate can keep growing and blooming and setting fruit all summer like Better Boy and Early Girl. Those are some of the common indeterminate ones you could plant.

Olivia Fuller:

So maybe for a grower, if some of our listeners are farmers selling wholesale, determinate might be the way to go?

Chip East:

They stake those with a four foot trailer system of strips of wood and the Florida weave with the string around them and that's hard to do when they're 10 feet tall, to do a system like that. So when you're talking about acres and acres, they like the plants that remain shorter, it just makes staking easier. So they do like the determinate and then they would just plant multiple times during the year. If someone grows several acres of tomatoes, they don't plant them all the same day, they'll plant in a couple of maybe two to three weeks later, plant again, plant again, plant again throughout the summer.

Olivia Fuller:

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We have a lot of market growers here in the state in particular. Would that carry true to them or would they want indeterminate for farmers' markets?

Chip East:

I'll see that both ways by far. Most of the farmers are planting determinate, but that's not always true. Especially even the farmers that do cherry or grape tomatoes. A lot of those are indeterminate, but it kind of depends again on the staking and if they're going to keep those crops coming in, yeah, it's real common for them to be determinate.

We hadn't talked about disease resistant, but that's another part of it. A lot of our disease resistant tomatoes, tomato spotted wilt resistant varieties, some of those and that's just been last year, we started getting some tomato spotted wilt resistance in the indeterminate varieties. Like there's a Better Boy Plus and a Big Beef Plus that has that plus is for that tomato spotted wilt resistance. But up until last year, if you had a tomato spotted wilt resistant tomato, it was a determinate type. So sometimes it's the stake and sometime it's for disease.

Olivia Fuller:

There's a lot of factors to consider there. What about greenhouse versus high tunnel versus just bare ground?

Chip East:

Yeah, again it'll tell you on the seed packages, but there's some tomatoes, by far the most common one, it's for the greenhouse tomatoes. People grow those in the wintertime when we can't grow them in the field, the light levels are lower in the wintertime. So the kind of tomatoes we'd plant outside are not the same varieties we'd plant in the greenhouse. But there's one called Trust is like the standard when it comes to greenhouse tomatoes around here. But there's one called Blitz and Match and Geronimo. There are several low light level tomatoes. If you just were to plant a Better Boy like that, you could grow the plant. But it would just be green, green, green. It just wouldn't ripen properly because it needs more light. These low light level tomatoes will ripen properly in that greenhouse in the wintertime.

Olivia Fuller:

So really paying attention to those seed packets and if you're ordering online really reading into that.

Chip East:

That's correct. Think about what characteristic you want from the tomato. For instance, if you're canning tomatoes, we can can any them, we can can cherry tomatoes, we can can any of them, but there's a lot of water in a tomato. And if I was canning, you might want to use a paste tomato, Roma types. Roma is just a word we use to describe a lot of these paste tomato. But there's several that are meaty and not as juicy. And if you're canning, that's something you would use. So think about the end goal. What are we doing with the tomato? If I'm canning, I'd want to grow a bunch of paste ones. If I'm worried about-

Olivia Fuller:

Salsa.

Chip East:

Hey, that would be another reason, for the paste ones. We hadn't talked a lot about disease resistance and all, but other than the tomato spotted wilt, but there's a fusarium wilt and verticillium wilt, nematodes can be a problem.

Olivia Fuller:

What's most common here in the state that people should really look for their variety being resistant to?

Chip East:

Somebody else may disagree. I would say fusarium wilt is high on the list. Tomato spotted wilt would be high on the list as well. We don't see the verticillium wilt like we do some of the others. There's a bacterial wilt, but there are some resistant. But there's very few, but there's tons of tomatoes resistant to fusarium wilt.

Olivia Fuller:

And when you're looking for that resistance, what are you looking for on the seed packet or the website?

Chip East:

When you see that seed packet, there's different races of these diseases and it'll say F1, F2, F3, that's fusarium wilt race one resistant. Keep in mind it would be nice, but there's not one tomato resistant to everything. Even early blight. There's some tomatoes resisted to early blight, but early blight is just common all over the Southeast.

But think of what we're trying to avoid. What's the biggest problem in the tomato patch? And I would take that information when determining which ones to be planting. And it's probably a good idea to learn how to grow your own from seed because there's tens of thousands of different kinds of tomatoes you can have access to plant those seeds. There's only a few of those available at your retail places that's already grown as a transplant.

If you have a greenhouse, there's a lot of stuff we can do early in the year. I might buy some when it comes planting time to have some nice plants up, get a crop sooner. But when it warms up, I could go ahead and plant tomato seeds in April. Now I'm not going to be the first person with tomatoes when I'm planting seeds in April, as opposed when everybody else is setting out transplants. But I could plant some transplants and then I could plant some seeds as well that would come in later in the year.

Olivia Fuller:

And I remember something you told me, it's not who has that first tomato at market, it's who has the last tomato at market?

Chip East:

That's a good way to think about it. A lot of people, whether it's tomato or ear of corn or whatever, it's kind of a battle in a neighborhood or at the farm supplier, coffee shop or whatever. Who has the first whatever tomato in this case. But I think it's just as important as who has the last one at the end of the year. Lot of times in the middle of the summer their garden's gone.

Olivia Fuller:

Right? Yeah.

Speaker 4:

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Olivia Fuller:

So we've talked a lot about diseases and that kind of stuff, so let's talk about some fun things as far as flavor. What about high acidity versus low acidity? Is that something people should consider when-?

Chip East:

That's a good question and something people think of a lot. Generally speaking, all tomatoes have the same amount of acid. The difference is the sugar. It's like lemonade and lemon juice. There's one big thing, difference between lemonade and lemon juice and it's sugar. Generally speaking, this is not true in all cases, but generally speaking, the off color something other than red tomato. So you can have them white, yellow, orange, black. There's different color, something other than red are usually higher sugar, which someone would interpret that as being low acid. But really, it's the same amount of acid.

Olivia Fuller:

The acid stays the same. Yeah, the lemonade analogy was very helpful.

Chip East:

If you want a bite to the tomato, if you want that acidic, then probably a lot of red ones. But there's just so many to choose from. I would recommend if you... There's so many to choose from, grow different ones and see which one you like the best. Just because you've been growing it for 20 years, there's thousands that you haven't even tried. But that involves growing your own from seed.

Olivia Fuller:

So that's why I have such a sweet tooth. And I don't like red tomatoes. I always choose the yellow one, the dark purple, all of the others that are not red. And I think that's because I must be sensing the sugar levels.

Chip East:

And a lot of people when they think of a tomato, they think it's got to be red. And we've done a lot of tomato taste tests around and I hate to tell you some favorite ones, but I've grown several different ones. And one of the cherry ones, a lot of people don't like the cherry ones. There's this one called Sungold and it's a little yellow tomato and people just go crazy over Sungold.

Olivia Fuller:

They love it. And man does it produce too. It's a very hardy plant. Yeah, the cherry tomatoes do really well here in the Southeast. I try and steer farmers towards that option. Because they do, they taste great. People just have in their head, those that have been refrigerated and shipped and they've gotten at the grocery store and you can't refrigerate a tomato.

Chip East:

Freshness is key-

Olivia Fuller:

It is.

Chip East:

To this.

Olivia Fuller:

Well, do you have a favorite for just you? What's in your garden Chip? You said the Sungold.

Chip East:

I'll plant seven or eight different varieties, a good many of those, but we'll plant seven or eight and I'll try to do a different seven or eight-

Olivia Fuller:

Every year.

Chip East:

But I'll tell you, I'll come back to... Big Beef is one of my favorite. If you like Butter Boy, you'd probably love Big Beef. It's got a better disease resistance.

Olivia Fuller:

And it's a good slicing?

Chip East:

It is a good slicing tomato. Big beef. I like Bella Rosa because it's a tomato spotted wilt resistant one. I always plant Sungold always. There's a Sweet 100 that's red though. But it's a good cherry tomato. I will mention we've done taste test of... We didn't mention heirloom versus hybrid.

Olivia Fuller:

Right.

Chip East:

And a hybrid is just a cross between two or more plants and heirloom we can grow it from seed every time, where the hybrid, we couldn't save our seeds and get that same exact plant. And that's why some people might like the heirloom. The trouble of the heirloom is disease resistant package is just not-

Olivia Fuller:

It's so hard to grow.

Chip East:

... there.

Olivia Fuller:

But people have their heart set on heirloom and I would love to change their mind and have people understand that the hybrids can taste just as great.

Chip East:

Just as... We would do-

Olivia Fuller:

And you'll actually get fruit from them.

Chip East:

We'll do taste tests and you get different results all over. But hybrids don't taste better, nor does do they taste worse. And the same thing with the heirloom. Back at one of our experiment stations years ago in Coleman, they grew about 70 different heirloom tomatoes. And I got the PowerPoint that of all, they would eat and is it good, bad, just rated them.

Some of them, and these are heirloom now, some of them are just their favorite ones. mouth watering and delicious, wonderful plant. Others that they had to spit out in the field, they just didn't even want to swallow it. They just didn't taste good. And again, everybody, we don't like the same soft drinks, we don't like the same ice cream, we don't like the same lot of them. We're not going to like the same tomatoes either. My point is, try the different ones and see which one you like. Just because your buddy says this is the best, well it might be to him.

Olivia Fuller:

And then all the many uses that they're using tomatoes for right now. I mean it's gotten very creative. I've seen some chefs make very impressive, even cocktails, straining out all of the other parts and making it clear, but it's still tomato juice in such a way. And they've gotten really creative with tomatoes, so the use is very important when choosing the variety.

Well thank you so much for coming on.

Chip East:

Thank You. Good to be here.

Speaker 1:

This has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.