

My Quest for the Perfect Tomato
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I began "serious" gardening in San Jose, California, many years ago. Back then, I had no idea that I was gardening on easy street. Every Spring, without giving it much thought, I bought a six-pack of red tomatoes at OSH and planted them in my backyard. A couple of months later I had a bounty of beautiful tomatoes that lasted all summer long.

The first Spring here in Pioneer I was eager to grow a crop of juicy red tomatoes. I bought some at OSH, like I always had before, and planted them in my new garden, just like I did in San Jose. To my surprise they were bland; not much better than grocery store tomatoes. I was so disappointed!

The following year I joined Amador County's Master Gardener program and started my quest for the perfect homegrown tomato. I found out why tomatoes that had tasted great in San Jose were bland here. The nights are too cold at my elevation.

At an annual Master Gardener Tomato Tasting competition, I discovered the wonderful world of heirloom tomatoes. Heirlooms are ones that have been around for at least 50 years and there are literally thousands of heirloom tomato varieties. They come in all sizes, shapes, and colors, but it's their intense tomatoey flavor that has kept them around for all these years. I figured that if I grew twenty-five different varieties each year, in five years I would have tasted more than a hundred tomatoes and I'd have a few favorites that I could grow each year.

I found lots of favorites, like Cosmonaut Volkov, a medium size red tomato from Russia; Brandywine, a large pink Amish heirloom; a beautiful yellow and red marbled tomato named Pineapple; and Southern Night, a "black" tomato the color of raw liver, but with a wonderful smoky flavor. I was in tomato heaven.

However, my time in heaven was limited. One year I noticed that in the heat of Summer my tomato plants didn't look so good and I wasn't getting nearly as many tomatoes as before. Master Gardeners are terrible at taking the time to diagnose their own garden problems, but I couldn't ignore this. My garden had become infected with Fusarium wilt, a soil disease that often kills tomato plants. I was heartbroken.

For the next few years, I grew hybrid tomatoes because they were the only ones resistant to Fusarium wilt, like Big Beef, Golden Girl, and Lemon Boy. They were good but they weren't wonderful like my heirlooms.

While looking through a book on propagation I learned that I could graft heirloom tomato plants onto root stock that is resistant to the disease. I tried it and it was easy, but took me forever to do. Professionals can graft 90 plants an hour but it takes me all day to do 30! I don't mind the time because it lets me grow my favorite heirlooms again, which is worth it.

Every Spring, the Master Gardeners sell tomato plants to the public at their plant sale. For the first time, this Spring we will also sell grafted Brandywine tomatoes for gardeners like me who want to grow heirlooms but need the disease resistance of a hybrid. The perfect tomato!