



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Get the most from September tomatoes!

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The recent spate of cool weather has reminded us that summer is coming to an end. Right now our tomato plants are pretty much at their peak. I'm picking every day. At the same time, these plants are still producing new growth and new flowers. For all but the cherry tomatoes, and other small fruited types, I remove all new growth and flowers at this time of year. Cold weather inhibits production and changes the flavor of the fruit---not nearly as sweet and tasty. As the weather cools, it is unlikely that any new flowers will produce full sized ripe fruit before the season ends. I would rather see any remaining energy that the plant has be put towards existing fruit that will definitely have a good chance to ripen. If you are in doubt, prune back some plants and let others continue growing. Let me know your thoughts.



Fox Cherry

I always like to have some cherry tomato plants close at hand---when I'm standing at my back door, there are three within reach.



Whenever I pass by, I pick a few tiny tomatoes for a yummy snack. I pay close attention to the flavor, so I try to pick them at just the right stage of ripeness, but of course some are a little more or a little less ripe, even though they all look mostly the same. The other day I picked five cherry tomatoes from the same plant and their flavor varied



Patty's Yellow Striped Beefsteak

considerably. I've noticed something similar with a new (to me) golf ball sized variety called 'Fox Cherry.' I sometimes detect a mealy texture, and to my palate, the flavor has been mostly unremarkable, but it pays to sample many times before pronouncing a verdict---I've changed my mind many times.

Speaking of new varieties, the world of plant hybridizers is buzzing these days, especially in the tomato world. Much of this breeding work is done by enthusiastic amateurs---home gardeners, in many cases. There are many breeding strategies, but it pretty much boils down to this---find two varieties that have desirable characteristics, and cross breed them. That's the easy part. The next step is to collect the resulting seed, and "grow it out"---that is, plant a row of plants using that seed, evaluate their fruit, and hope you have something new, noteworthy, and better than what is already out there. Among other things, you check disease resistance, flavor, fruit quality, color, earliness, and overall attractiveness to customers. Try it---your odds are much better than the lottery.

Some of the most interesting breeding is being done by crossing two heirloom varieties---plant varieties that have been around for many years. Every year there are many more of these "new old" hybrids introduced. The naming of these new plants is sometimes rather curious. As a retailer, I know that a catchy name is desirable if you want customers to consider the plant. (Not unlike the fairly new trend of extravagant wine labels.) Many good varieties just sit on the shelves---their names don't compel customers to try them.



Onions---August 4th



Onion Harvest

For example, we used to offer a good tasting variety called 'Druzba.' This is a Slavic word for friendship, but hardly anyone here knows that. Consider, then, something like 'Patty's Yellow Striped Beefsteak'---a much more interesting and intriguing name (and also a tasty variety.) Which of those two would you choose? Even so, try not to let an off-putting name discourage you from trying a new variety---you may be pleasantly surprised; but if you are naming your own hybrid creation, choose a name carefully.

My onion harvest is now complete. I planted 'Yellow Sweet Spanish' onion sets on April 1st. Other than pulling out a few weeds, they took no care. I pulled the mature onions out of the ground on August 4th, and let them lie

in the sunny, dry garden for a few days. Then I rubbed off the excess soil and laid them out on a piece of cardboard in my garage, for curing. Ideally, the garage door should be left open for ventilation, but I wasn't home that much. Yet, the onions cured nicely, drying out over the next two weeks or so. Then I trimmed off the roots and the brown stems. About thirty of the onions were fairly small, about 2-2.5" diameter. But that is the perfect size for a Door County style fish boil so I used them for our annual boil in mid-August---they



turned out just great. The remaining onions are all about 4" wide. I'll put them in mesh bags and store them for use over the fall and winter.

I planted my leeks about a month after the onion sets. They can be pulled any time now, but they won't really be fully ready for at least another month. Then you can pull them as needed until the ground freezes. I harvest some early because



Fishboil "boil over"---the finale

I like to use them in the bruschetta that I make for Tomatomania. Stop by and sample some when you visit us at that event on September 12th.



Chipmunk damage---grrrr!

garden.) So, the chipmunks get a brand new home, and I get a pest free garden---it's a win-win!

Most every gardener must contend with at least one kind of vexing varmint. I've dealt with a variety of larger critters over the years, but since I moved not long ago my primary nemesis has been the tiny chipmunk. Cute as they are, they have been a big problem for me. They like to crawl up on my tomato plants and take a nibble out of each fruit, just a day or two before they are ready for picking. Or so it seems---I guess we all get a little like Elmer Fudd when it comes to varmints in the garden. I've been capturing the chipmunks with a live trap, using peanuts for bait. So far this season I've trapped nineteen of them. I release all of them at the same natural area so that the "family" stays intact, if disrupted. (It is far from anyone else's

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Kevin Milaeger's Caprese Bruschetta