



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Dwarf Tomatoes---The Next Big Thing

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There are a number of reasons why you might choose to grow your tomatoes in containers. Maybe you have poor garden soil, or you have limited space outside your condo or apartment. Also, you might be physically challenged or you just don't like bending over any more. The idea of growing in containers is appealing, but you don't want the typical six foot tall tomato because it's hard to manage. Turns out there are many like you, and plant breeders have been developing the ever-growing category of dwarf tomato plants to address your needs.

This year we have our largest ever collection of dwarf tomatoes. Five varieties in our regular collection, and another six in our limited time collection known as "Vintage Veggies." (That program is technically over for this year, but some dwarf varieties remain available.) These plants all



dwarf pictured on left

have a very thick stem, and with their short stature the small fruited types may not require support. The large fruited types should be caged. The amount and size of the fruit is too much for the plant to bear. If you already own some cages, I would use them, even for the small fruited types---they can only help. Another distinguishing feature of the dwarf tomato plant is the leaves---they are unusually thick, dark green, and rather hairy (rugose.) These features don't mean they are superior varieties, but they do help to identify dwarf tomato plants.

There are some common misconceptions about dwarf plants. Number one is that the fruit itself is dwarf, or small. Certainly, there are cherry fruited dwarf tomatoes, but there are also many large slicers. Secondly, because of the short stature of dwarf tomatoes, it is often assumed they are "determinate," or bush types. Determinate tomatoes generally bear heavily over a short period of the season. But no, as it turns out, dwarf tomatoes are neither determinate nor indeterminate, but

are in a class by themselves. Noted tomato authority Craig



LeHoullier says "I like to think of the dwarfs as essentially indeterminate tomatoes that grow at half of the vertical rate, and produce tomatoes gradually throughout the season..." Most gardeners prefer indeterminates because of the long harvest season, so I was glad to hear from LeHoullier that most of the dwarfs bear like indeterminates.

You can see the appeal of dwarf tomato varieties. There are many tasty varieties, of every size and color. They stay fairly short, so they are easy to manage, and many have a long harvest season. I suggest you try one of our eleven



dwarf pictured on right



Husky Cherry Red

varieties and see if they work for you. Two of the new ones that look interesting to me are 'Adelaide Festival' and 'Wherokowhaji.' Both are from Australian breeders. The first is a rich purple color with green streaks that turn gold when ripe. The second is yellow with a red center. Both are slicers. In past years our best-selling dwarfs have been 'Husky Cherry Red,' a larger cherry, and 'Patio,' a red salad tomato. Both score well at Tomatomania every year.

On a side note, there is a dedicated group of international enthusiasts out there who are promoting dwarf tomato varieties. The group's efforts are explained on their website, the Dwarf Tomato Project (www.dwarftomatooproject.net). Many of them are dedicated amateurs who enjoy hybridizing new varieties. They are very free with information and seed is available.