



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Is it Time to Plant Tomatoes?

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Planting time for many of our most popular vegetables is fast approaching. Tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, and eggplant (all of tropical origin) can safely be planted when night temperatures are reliably above 50 degrees, and some experts say 55. That usually means June. Here's what I do. Around Memorial Day, if the ten day forecast predicts night temps above 50, I go ahead and plant.

That said, this year I've decided to try a little experiment. I planted a few of these "tropical" vegetables on May 13, considerably earlier than I recommend. I am protecting some of them



with a product known as "Season Starter" (another manufacturer calls them "Wall 'O Water"). I mentioned this item in an earlier blog, but briefly,



'Season Starter'

it consists of a group of water filled tubes that form a ring, placed around a plant that needs protection. The water provides insulation. Incredibly, the manufacturer says that with this product, you can plant "6 to 8 weeks earlier than normal." I am trying for 2 or 3 weeks----we'll see how that goes. I am a natural skeptic when it comes to gimmicks, but a number of customers have told me how good this product is, so this will be a product test. I planted four each of 'Wisconsin 55' tomatoes, 'Wisconsin Wonder' peppers, and 'Fanfare' cucumbers. Half of the plants are protected; the others

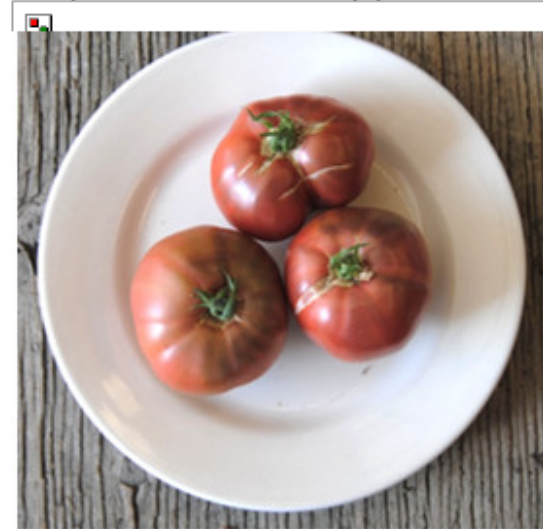
are not. I'll follow up with an evaluation at a later date. Perhaps some of you have already tried this product---please let me know how it worked out for you.

I've got my personal larger group of tomato plants set aside in the

greenhouse, ready for Memorial Day planting. Here are my selections for this year. In the large red tomato category my favorite is 'Brandy Boy' so I'll put in several of those. It has fantastic flavor and it bears heavily. If I could grow only one tomato, this meaty tomato would be it. Next is 'Wisconsin 55', an older hybrid, created just after WWII. It is smaller than 'Brandy Boy,' but has a zestier flavor and is a consistent performer. 'Rose' is a pink beefsteak type, with a smooth, yet full flavor. 'Ficarazzi' is new, said to be highly acidic, which is the reason for its strong flavor (so they say). Lastly, and slightly smaller, is the French 'Carmello.' This ten ounce tomato (a little smaller than a tennis ball) is very popular among home gardeners in Europe. It is flavorful, very productive, and crack resistant, despite its thin



Tomato 'Brandy Boy'



Tomato 'Frankenstein Black'

skin. In the large novelty colored category (novelty does not indicate lesser quality) many of you know my favorite is 'Ananas Noire.' This is a huge beefsteak tomato, primarily green in color when ripe. Its flavor is rich and tangy and it is also prolific. (Many large fruited tomatoes don't bear heavily.)

'Frankenstein Black' and 'Black Krim' are both very dark tomatoes (most of the "black" tomatoes originated in the Ukraine) with a rich, some say smoky, flavor. 'Armenian Bicolor' is new for us. It is a yellow tomato with a red center, a common coloration. Others of

this type that I have grown tasted fine, but haven't produced very heavily. I'm hoping this one is an improvement. I like growing as many colors as possible. When sliced and arranged nicely on a platter they make a wonderful presentation.

In the salad tomato category (about 2" wide) my perennial favorite is 'Bloody Butcher.' The meat of this tomato is the deepest red of any tomato I've seen. It is very flavorful, and is one of the earliest of all tomatoes. I've never counted, but I bet a well grown plant produces well over 75 tomatoes. I'm trying two new salad tomatoes this year---'Plum Crimson' and 'Slava Plum.' Both are reputed to be very flavorful and productive. Incidentally, when evaluating new tomatoes, I try to give them all numerous taste tests. I've found that the flavor can vary with the fluctuating environmental factors, so I like to taste them several



Tomato 'Bloody Butcher'

times during the season before coming to a conclusion.

The last category is the small fruited tomatoes, the cherry and grape types, though this year I am growing only cherries. 'Sweet Baby Girl' is my



Tomato 'Sungold'

favorite red. It has everything I could want---sweetness, flavor, and production. 'Sungold' is a golden yellow cherry with unbelievable sweetness. It is also very productive. It's ideal for snacking in the garden. 'Cherry Roma' was new last year but I never sampled it. It was a hit at Tomatomania so I want to try it myself. It is a deeper red, and is somewhat elongated---maybe we should include it with the grape tomatoes. I'm trying three new ones we've never grown before. 'Bicolor Cherry', a gold variety with reddish

mottling that is attractive and hopefully tasty. Also new are 'Tiger Green' and 'Tiger Pink.' Both are a little larger than true cherries, and have pointed tips. Perhaps their most striking feature is their colorful streaks. We'll see if their flavor matches their curious beauty.

I know I recommend that you wait to plant the tropical vegetables, but you can't wait, can you? I don't blame you---we all have Spring Fever. If I didn't have a greenhouse, I'd buy my plants and take them indoors and out, depending on the weather, until planting time. I might even transplant some of them to a larger pot size, especially the fast growers like tomatoes. They would definitely benefit from that. If you decide to go ahead and plant directly in the garden, may the warmth be with you. Happy planting!



Tomato 'Cherry Roma'

Please email me (kevin@milaegers.com) if you have any questions or comments.