



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

My Tomato Garden 2012

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I am frequently asked to recommend tomato varieties. In the course of answering that question, I'm further asked what tomatoes I am growing in my own garden, and my answer to that question is quite different from the first question. Like everyone else, I tailor my garden to my own taste preferences, but I'm always willing to try new things. This year I am planning on about 25 plants. About 15 are varieties I have grown before and have become favorites. The rest are intriguing newcomers, at least to my garden. I'm not going to describe every variety I am growing, but I will list most of them and make a few comments.



Brandywine



Gold Medal

The first group is the standard tomatoes, red or pink, baseball sized or larger---some are heirlooms and some are hybrids. The ones I've been growing for years are 'Wisconsin 55,' 'Brandywine,' 'Rose,' 'Abe Lincoln,' 'Brandy Boy,' and 'Stupice.' I am adding two new ones in this category--'Big Daddy,' which is a new hybrid from Burpee, and purported to be a big improvement on their legendary 'Big Boy' variety. The second is 'Super Sioux,' an improved form of 'Sioux,' one that I have liked in the past. These are all excellent slicing tomatoes.

I grow are the large yellow types that have a reddish "core." When these are sliced you see the yellow fruit with a red starburst pattern in the center. Van Gogh said "there is no blue without yellow," so I like to serve these slices on a blue plate to delight my guests that are fellow tomato aficionados. It's a visual and culinary treat. Come to think of it, the irregular starburst pattern itself is also rather Van Gogh-like. There are many varieties with this coloring. I am growing the tried and true 'Virginia Sweets,' 'Gold Medal,' 'Tie Dye Hybrid,' and 'Hillbilly Potato Leaf,' along with a new heirloom called 'Mammoth German Gold.' It's hard for me to move on to the next category---my brain doesn't want to leave these beauties!



Ananas Noire

Other non-traditional tomatoes include 'Ananas Noire,' a large, beefsteak type that is primarily green, with purplish black areas, and some pink. It has what I would call a tangy flavor. I like to include it when I make my Caprese bruschetta recipe, for an added flavor dimension. 'Green Zebra' is a smaller tomato that is also green when ripe, sort of a yellowish green, with streaks. It also has that tangy quality. I've been growing both of these for a number of



Green Zebra

years. The so called "black" varieties (really more of a dark brownish red) add yet another distinctive flavor quality. Often the flavor is described as "smoky," but I'm not sure that's what I would call it. I'm growing two that I've grown for at least a couple of years. One is just called 'Black,' and the other is 'Frankenstein Black.' It's not particularly scary or freakish so I am guessing the name might be a marketing gimmick. Both of these "black" types are slicers, about tennis ball size or a little smaller.

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I also like to grow salad size tomatoes. These are great when cut in quarters---they hold their shape

nice so they make a great presentation in a salad, unlike the beefsteak types. My favorite salad tomato is 'Bloody Butcher,' a very dark red tomato that is about the size of a golf ball and grows in clusters. This year I am also trying, for the first time in many years, an old one simply called 'Red Plum.' My recollection is that it is denser, and less juicy than 'Bloody Butcher,' but taste is the real issue for me so I am looking forward to comparing the two.

No tomato garden would be complete without some cherry tomatoes. I check my plants every morning (and usually in the evening, too) and I always munch on a few cherries during my inspection. For years my standard red has been 'Sweet Baby Girl,' though it is not the best seller at our greenhouse. For a sweet yellow/gold variety I like 'Sun Gold.' I grew this last year alongside my previous favorite, 'Sun Sugar,' and I liked 'Sun Gold' better, though there isn't a whole lot of difference. At our Tomatomania taste test last year, they were our top vote getters. I am trying one new cherry this year, called 'Christmas Grapes.' It bears fruit in dense clusters.



Sun Sugar

Tomatoes take up the bulk of my garden, but I am growing quite a few other plants, too. Among these are peppers, raspberries, onions, cucumbers, okra, rhubarb, and plenty of basil. I'll be reporting on the garden progress throughout the growing season. We'll see if I am still recommending the same plants at season's end.