



Kevin Milaeger

*Milaeger's*

## Tomatoes in Containers!

Kevin Milaeger

**One of the most frequent questions** we get on the vegetable lot at Milaeger's is "What kind of tomatoes can I grow in containers?" The short answer is "Any of them." For our summer crop of tomatoes at Milaeger's, we grow out every single tomato variety in containers. But for the homeowner, the short answer is insufficient---there are a number of factors that you must weigh before you make your choices.

First, some definitions. Tomatoes are divided into two categories, determinate and indeterminate. Indeterminate are the so-called "vine" tomatoes. These are not vines in the sense that they will wrap themselves on fences (like clematis), nor will they clasp onto brick or wood (like Boston Ivy.) But they will keep on growing as long as the weather is warm and their other basic needs are met. Since they keep



on growing, some support is needed---usually a cage or a heavy stake. They can easily get six feet tall and ten feet is not uncommon. But like any plant, they can easily be pruned if they get too tall (at some uncertain expense to fruit production.) Most growers feel the taste of indeterminate tomatoes is superior to that of determinate varieties.

Determinate tomatoes stay relatively short. Some novelties are less than a foot high, but most are in the 36-48" range. They are sometimes stocky and perhaps don't need supports, but I like to cage



**Kevin Milaeger with Tomato Cage**

them anyway. There is nothing worse than a fruit laden plant getting bent over by a good breeze. I like to use peony rings for determinate tomatoes. They are 30" high and they are made of a heavier gauge metal than other cages.

They are ideal for most any determinate tomato, and they are inexpensive too. For the most part, this class of tomato tends to bear fruit in one rush, and then finish. That is why they are the favorite for large farm production. They can be picked mechanically, and the machines can go through and pick them all at once---a huge labor savings for farmers.

To complicate matters, a "gray" tomato category has lately emerged. These are sometimes known as "semi-determinate" or "short indeterminate" tomatoes. They are shorter varieties that continue to bear fruit until the weather turns cold.

Varieties that fall into this category are 'Cherry Falls,' a trailer, 'Lizzano,' a short growing cherry tomato, 'Cal Ace,' 'Sweet Seedless,' and 'Black.' ('Black' scored very high in our blind taste test last year.) The jury is still out on the efficacy of some of these varieties. I haven't sampled all of them yet. But I am always skeptical of varieties that are bred for a certain characteristic, other than taste. It makes more sense, to me, to select varieties for superior taste, and then look for other characteristics that might be beneficial. Still, I remain open minded and I look forward to tasting some of these this year.



**Kevin Milaeger with Peony Ring**



To recap---determinate (or bush) varieties are easier to control and are more compact in habit. The tradeoff is less fruit production, and perhaps less flavor. Indeterminate (vine) tomatoes require more management and space, including staking or caging. But they produce more fruit, and the fruit is probably tastier. (Of course, if

## Tomato Black

you look hard enough I am sure you can find exceptions to these generalizations.)

If you choose determinate, here are some popular choices. For small fruit (golf ball size,) 'Husky Red Cherry' is very popular. For a little larger fruit, 'Patio' is the most popular. For tennis ball size fruit, 'Celebrity' is number one in sales. These are all red tomatoes, by the way.

If you decide to go with indeterminate varieties there are many more choices. Our two best-selling red cherry tomatoes are 'Supersweet 100' and 'Sweet Baby Girl.' For salad tomatoes, 'Bloody Butcher' and the slightly larger 'Early Girl' are the best sellers. For tennis ball size-- "Wisconsin 55,' Super Sioux,' or 'Big Boy' are the top sellers. For beefsteak types, 'Beefsteak,' 'Big Beef,' and \*'Brandywine' are the most popular.



Brandywine

Now you must choose a container. We recommend something in the 10-15 gallon size. If the plant is healthy, the roots will easily fill the pot. The large soil volume means it won't need to be watered as often as smaller pots. Also, the added soil weight of the large pot helps the plant from getting top heavy, and blowing over. For soil, we recommend our own Milaeger's potting soil, but I like to add a few shovels of topsoil, for the added weight, and for some of the nutrients that are found in topsoil. I also like the "Dr. Earth" brand potting soil for containers. It is in an orange bag and is called "Pot o' Gold." It is billed as an "all-purpose potting soil" for containers. I've already got a few plants potted up in this mix, and I will likely do a few more.



Since I moved to a different house about seven years ago, I have been growing my tomatoes exclusively in containers. My soil is almost all clay, so I decided it would just be easier for me to use containers. I have had an excellent crop every year, with some variations, mostly due to weather. I grow only indeterminate tomatoes,



usually about twenty plants. The methods I have described work for me, and I believe they'll work for you, too. Please [email me](#) directly if you have any questions.

\*Photo courtesy of parkseed.com