



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Tomatoes on My Mind!

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It hardly seems possible now, but I was still picking tomatoes just two months ago, in early November. Last year's extended warm season was unusual, to be sure; now we are back to "normal." Also back in early November, my first 2016 seed catalog arrived. Now I have a foot high stack of catalogs, and I enjoy reading them on these cold, post-holiday evenings. I'm looking for "new" vegetable varieties that might interest you, to be offered during our mid-May "Vintage Veggie" program. For that program, we grow over sixty varieties (about 65% tomatoes) that we haven't tried before, or maybe some that we haven't grown in quite a while. That might seem like a lot of "new" varieties, but its hard (yet fun) to narrow it down to that number. There are many thousands to choose from.

Photo: www.ivygarth.com



Arkansas Traveler

First, there are the many old, or "heirloom" tomato varieties that are always appealing. The seed catalog lingo is very familiar, touting the "old fashioned flavor" that we all supposedly remember--- that hype works on me! True heirloom vegetables will produce seed that, when successfully grown, will produce fruit that is true to the parent plant. These are called "open pollinated" plants, sometimes abbreviated in catalogs as "OP." One from this category that I have been anxious to try is called 'Arkansas Traveler,' sometimes just called 'Traveler.' It's been a staple in the Ozarks forever, and I've had a few requests for it here. It is pinkish red, about six ounce average size. Like many with pink coloring, its flavor is smooth and mild, not as acidic and "bitey" as red tomatoes; many folks like that trait. The second category is the "modern" hybrids---those varieties bred by professional



Chef's Choice Pink

breeders. The breeders are working on characteristics such as cold tolerance (that is, flowers that tolerate cool weather and don't abort), higher fruit production, reduced fruit cracking, improved flavor, and of course, disease resistance. Hybrid tomatoes are relatively new to the world---the first hybrid, known simply as 'Burpee Hybrid,' was introduced in 1946. One of our favorite hybrids is



Photo: www.jungseed.com

'Wisconsin 55,' also one of the earliest types, introduced in 1948; it's still a winner. Incidentally, seed saved from F1 (first generation) hybrid tomatoes will not produce fruit that is identical to the parent. A promising newcomer that looks appealing is 'Chef's Choice Pink,' a large, beefsteak type with pink flesh and skin. It was an "All-America Selections" winner last year, so it has already passed one big test. Another one we are considering is 'Ultimate Opener,'



Ultimate Opener

an early bearer with superior disease resistance---something we are all interested in. This is from the same hybridizer who created 'Early Girl,' but this new one is considerably larger, and has a heavier yield. The last group is a

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Red Rose

newer class of hybrid that has become popular in recent years, the so called "heirloom marriage." This is the crossing of two genuine old varieties, with an eye towards combining their best features. The hybridization is the easy part---the years spent evaluating the results are what take the time and effort. There is no guarantee anything worthwhile will result. Several in this last category have caught my eye. 'Red Rose' is a cross of a very popular heirloom known as 'Brandywine' and an old hybrid called 'Rutgers.' It is a big pink tomato, averaging 10-16 ounces. It is disease and crack resistant, with the taste resembling that of 'Brandywine.' Another variety of interest is a "black" tomato, a cross

between 'Cherokee Purple' and 'Carbon,' called 'Cherokee Carbon.' It has the great flavor of the parents, but heavier bearing, and earlier.

In the gardening world, the term "GMO" is much discussed these days. It is an acronym for Genetically Modified Organism---in this case, it refers to vegetable seeds. Although this process is government sanctioned, there are a number of vocal detractors. They sometimes refer to food harvested from GMO seeds as

Photo: www.ivygarth.com

"Frankenfood." We are frequently asked if our products are "GMO free," so it is time we addressed the issue. I doubt there is a greenhouse/garden center in the USA that sells GMO seeds, or plants that are grown from GMO seed. GMO seed is just simply not available to any of us. I am not entirely certain, but I think that GMO seed is used exclusively by the largest commercial farmers. Relatively few crops are grown with GMO seed, but they are significant ones. Big GMO crops in the USA are corn (presumably for ethanol and probably the frequently maligned "high fructose corn syrup"), canola, cotton, and soy, as well as a few very minor crops. GMO seed is not available for the home gardener or the commercial greenhouse grower---at least none of our suppliers offer any, so rest assured.



Cherokee Carbon