

Tomato Tales, Trials, and Tribulations



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Pumpkin update. I'm happy to report that the hand pollination that was done on July 24th was successful, and I'm now doting over the new pumpkin that's growing every day. It's about the size of a basketball, and it now rests on a pallet so it won't rot on the ground in case we have lots of rain. More pumpkins have formed, some without my help. I have four big, vigorous plants and sometimes five or six days would go by with many new flowers, but usually all male. Maybe it's for the best. I know that with fewer pumpkins on the vine, those that we do have will be larger. But by mid-August there were plenty of female flowers, so now there are lots of pumpkins coming on. There are so many bees out there that I no longer feel compelled to help with pollination. Some serious growers remove excess pumpkins so all the energy goes into just a few pumpkins, helping them grow larger, but I've elected to let them all develop. It's fun to watch them as there is marked growth every day.

I wish I could say my tomatoes were as lush as my pumpkins. Through most of July they looked fantastic but still hadn't produced much. By early August, I was giving tomatoes away, but signs of disease began to show up. Leaf spot and early blight. Both are ugly and eventually kill the plant, but you usually get some fruit. Now the disease has spread to more of the plants, but none are actually dead yet, and all eighteen produced fruit. Probably the most vigorous is 'Wisconsin 55,' which shows no disease despite the plants around it being afflicted. Some others are disease resistant too. I've had a few hornworms, but they haven't done much damage, so I let them be.

This is all from my home garden. In my garden at the office, the tomato plants are perfectly healthy. Go figure.

You may recall that in my first blog of this season I explained how I wanted to try and find a better tasting paste (Roma) tomato. I researched that subject and found a few varieties that reputedly had superior flavor. They all grew just fine but the fruit of most was lacking in flavor. So far, the two best tasting varieties are 'Russian Big Roma,' and 'Kenosha Paste.' We've been growing 'Kenosha Paste' for about six years, but the flavor wasn't very good. We'd been collecting our own seed, but last fall I acquired new seed through our friend Curzio Caravati of Kenosha, who has been developing this variety. The flavor is much improved with the new seed. Perhaps you have a favorite Roma that you can recommend for us to trial. We've already tried the obvious one such as 'Roma' and others that we've been offering for years. Sales of plants of these varieties remains strong, but when we sampled them to compare the flavor, our tasting team was always disappointed. Hence the search for more flavorful varieties. We'll continue to pursue our quest for flavor.



Summer of Love



Chef's Choice Black

When customers show up at Milaegeer's in spring to buy their plants, they often ask "What's new?" After we offer an answer they often select their old favorites anyway. In the case of tomatoes that means they end up choosing varieties like 'Big Boy' or 'Wisconsin 55.' Nothing wrong with those great varieties. Many years ago we began offering some of the more unusual types. Often these don't fit in a traditional category, so we started calling them "novelty" tomatoes. That name has stuck but I never really liked it because it implies that perhaps their main value is in their unique appearance rather than their taste. Not so. Having sampled hundreds of novelty types I can attest to the value of many of them as flavorful gems.

Included in novelty tomatoes are the so-called "black" varieties. This is the misnomer. They are dark, to be sure, but nowhere near black. Sometimes they're called purple, pink, brown, dusky, and other similar words, and really none are quite accurate in describing them. Sometimes the color in the name refers to the flesh, not the skin, so that further confuses things. I would say brownish dark red is probably the most accurate color description, but that doesn't sound very appealing. So we're probably stuck with names that don't make a lot of sense. Nevertheless these lovelies are favored by many tomato aficionados. I suggest you try several and see which is your own favorite. The flavor of these types is as hard to describe as the color. If you read many online descriptions you will find that many writers sound like they are describing wines. Hints of this, undertones of that, smoky, savory, intense, balanced, sassy, full flavored, complex, sublime—these are all words and phrases that have been used to describe them. Some of them are so vague as to be worthless and others contradict each other. I say forget the verbiage and just try some. Some of our current favorite are 'Paul Robeson,' 'Carbon,' 'Chef's Choice Black,' 'Cherokee Purple,' 'Black,' and others. Most of these trace their origin to the Crimea area of Russia.



Green Zebra

The yellow novelties that we're now growing all have a red sunburst at the blossom end of the fruit, which bleeds into the core of the fruit making for a wonderful show when sliced. These yellow fruits tend to be more mild flavored than typical red tomatoes, a little less acidic. They are all fairly large, beefsteak types. The consistent best seller is 'Gold Medal,' but we're always trying new ones. This year we're trying 'Gin Fizz.' In recent years we've grown 'Hillbilly,' 'Pineapple,' and 'Virginia Sweets.'

Perhaps the novelty tomato group that is least understood is the green tomato. These are colored mostly green when fully ripe, so it's sometimes hard to tell when they're ripe. Examples are 'Green Zebra,' 'Aunt Ruby's German Green,' and a host of others. We only grow those two, since there is not a lot of demand. 'Green Zebra' starts out green, streaked with white. When the white part turns dark yellow, it's ripe. It has a tangy flavor, as does 'Aunt Ruby.' This one is a beefsteak type, much larger than 'Green Zebra.' The color changes slightly when ripe. I've talked to some folks who think 'Aunt Ruby' is the best tomato they ever tasted. A new greenish tomato we're trialing is 'Summer of Love.' Color is red with green streaks, and the fruit is tennis ball size. Tangy, like other green varieties.



Gin Fizz



Ananas Noire

We're already planning the 2022 test garden and right now the plan is to compare novelty varieties. The favorite for years has been 'Ananas Noire,' aka 'Black Pineapple.' It's mostly green when fully ripe, with a dark, reddish brown tint at the blossom end. It's beauty is fully displayed when sliced. Guests never fail to ask about it. It was introduced to the tomato world in 2005 from a breeder in Belgium. It's a natural hybrid, occurring in a batch of 'Pineapple' tomatoes, apparently a "chance cross" with an unknown, dark variety. It's open pollinated, which means that it will come true from seed, so you can easily collect it and grow your own. This is the variety I always recommend when enthusiasts tell me they want to try something "different." It never disappoints. I've never had anyone complain about it. It is very flavorful, colorful, and prolific. Plus, it's pretty disease resistant. Despite all the good reports, we continue to strive to offer the finest varieties, so 'Ananas Noire' must face the competition. There is so much amateur breeding going on right now that it won't be hard to find other novelty types to compare to my favorite. May the best tomato win!

Please email me (kevin@milaegers.com) with your questions and comments!

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