



**Kevin Milaeger**

*Milaeger's*

## **Jefferson's Tomatoes & Tomato Nutrition**

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**Tomato growing in the United States** began, more or less, when Thomas Jefferson was in his prime. He was an enthusiastic gardener (garden owner, actually---he didn't get his hands dirty.) He sampled the strange, new tomato fruit while in Paris, representing our government. The French had already come to love the new fruit, and nicknamed it "love apple." But many Americans, and some northern Europeans, were afraid of the new fruit.

They knew it was related to a sinister plant named "deadly nightshade."

Nevertheless, Jefferson sent seeds home and before long they were a staple at Monticello. By today's standards, Jefferson's tomatoes would be considered ugly, and probably wouldn't make it into modern grocery stores. They were often misshapen and sometimes even had rough skin. But since then, much hybridization and varietal selection has taken



place. In the later 1800's, the first steps were taken to "improve" the tomato's appearance, while maintaining its flavor. At this time, most tomatoes were grown by homeowners for home use. It wasn't a suitable crop for many farmers because there was no way to ship it, due to the short shelf life and inadequate transportation. If a farmer did grow tomatoes, he sold them only at local markets. Years later, after transportation improved (trains, then trucks), larger farmers tried to make their product more marketable. The hybridizers found ways to do this, but at the expense of flavor and nutrients 😞

The trend today, among some hybridizers, is to correct those shortcomings. Researchers went back to the tomato's place of origin, the high plateaus of Peru, and found a number of undiscovered species of tomatoes that are much more nutritious than the tomatoes we grow now. Work has been

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underway to use these newly found plants in breeding programs, with higher nutrition and flavor as priorities. Dr. Foolad of Penn State University has been working on tomatoes since 1994, and last year his first variety was introduced. We now have it at



**Valentine**

Milaeger's ---it's called 'Valentine.' It's a grape tomato, and if you've been reading my blogs you know that small red tomatoes are the most nutritious, the grapes more so than the cherries. 'Valentine' has three times more lycopene than grocery store tomatoes and is resistant to early blight. Perhaps more importantly, it won a blind taste test and was awarded a prize at the All-American Selections in 2018. (AAS is an organization that reviews new plants, rates them, and award prizes to the winners.) 'Valentine' sounds most promising. Dr. Foolad continues

his work on tomatoes, and now believes he has varieties in the offing that will be even better than 'Valentine.' We'll be on the lookout.

For years now, we've been offering a close relative of the wild tomato----it's called 'Sweet Pea Currant.' It doesn't taste like a currant, but the fruit is about the size of a currant. You would need about 450 of them to equal the weight of a large beefsteak tomato. They're extremely sweet, so kids love them. Very nutritious, too---no need to tell the kids about that. The plants are often huge. Over 10' tall is not uncommon, and they have considerable sprawl too. I think it's a great plant to introduce a kid to gardening. They would be amazed at the giant, Dr. Seuss-like plant they grew, and how tasty and sweet the fruit is. They'll never forget the experience.



**Sweet Pea Currant**

The lowly red pear tomato is another variety with an amazing amount of lycopene---27 times that of a typical grocery store tomato, by weight. The red pear tomato is very sweet, and the cute shape makes it an attractive garnish. The drawback is that it cracks very easily. Farmers don't like it since it's nearly impossible to sell a cracked tomato. In the trial garden at Milaeger's we will be growing a red pear variety that is new to us, 'Austin's Red Pear,' hoping that it doesn't crack too much. We don't want to offer it on our sales lot until we know that the problem has been resolved. But we'll probably have a few extra plants, so if you track me down when you visit, I'll be happy to share. No, I can't set any aside in advance, but the plants will be ready in late May. You know where



**Austin's Red Pear**

to find me.