

THE WOLF PEACH SPEAKS!

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TENACITY OF THE TOMATO

By Jenna Empey

It's summer and the time has arrived for tomatoes. It is the experience which cannot be surpassed: picking those first fruits you have so patiently watched for and then devouring them.

But as you picture this event in your mind, what colour is the tomato you are enjoying? What's its shape? Could it be a Yellow Pear, a Green Zebra, a bumpy and wild Purple Calabash, a Striped Roman, a Persimmon or a Goldie? Or is it just a round red beefsteak? Perhaps this summer you can expand your definition of a tomato by exploring some of the heirloom varieties named above.

There are over three thousand varieties of tomatoes cultivated today and over 12 billion tons are grown each year. The tomato is one of the most popular vegetables in the world today. Now loved by many, such was not always the case: the tomato was once one of the most feared and misunderstood vegetables. To eat one was considered imminent death, or in other cultures it was simply considered an 'unwholesome fruit.' The tomato... scandalous?

From humble beginnings

Tomatoes originated on the western coast of South America near present-day Peru, where eight species in the tomato genus still grow wild. The first tomatoes humans gathered were nickel-sized, possibly fuzzy berries, which grew as perennials. The tomato may have originated in South America but was domesticated in Central America by the Aztecs. By 3500 BC, it was part of their regular diet; by 700 AD, it was raised as a crop.

The tomato travels

When the Spanish explorer Cortez arrived in the 16th century, he and his conquistadors were impressed by the tomato and brought it back to the Old World along with other plundered riches. The tomato arrived in Spain and was a quick success. Its popularity spread and the tomato was warmly embraced by Portugal and Italy. Today many people think of the tomato as typically round, red, and rather on the large side, but the tomato that Cortez brought back was a much smaller fruit sporting an outrageous yellow! This led to the some of the names other cultures have bestowed upon the tomato as it made its debut into



Jenna gathering Yellow Currant tomatoes.

Europe. 'Pomodoro,' or Golden Apple by the Italians, 'Pomme d'amour' or love apple by the French, and, to the Germans, 'Apple of Paradise.' The Spanish had learned the native word for tomato before leaving the New World. The natives called it 'tomatl,' so the Spanish called it 'tomate.'

An 'unwholesome fruit'

By 1623, there were four known types of tomato: the original yellow, orange, golden and red. The tomato grew as a sensation and a favourite in the Mediterranean region, as well as Germany. But as celebrated as the tomato was in some regions, the British called it 'unwholesome fruit.' It was rejected—



deemed poisonous, nutritionally devoid and a cause of gout. This was due to the tomato's botanical classification as a member of the Solanaceae family, which includes relatives the likes of deadly nightshade, monkshood, datura, mandrake, henbane, tobacco and the potato, which all have various toxic qualities. This was not helped when Carl Linnaeus gave the tomato the name *Lycopersicon esculentum*, meaning edible wolf peach, in the 18th century.

The British brought their clouded view of the tomato to North America. Colonists in New England wouldn't touch the plant until well into the 1800s. Their phobia relented somewhat with the realization of the culinary potential as seen with Creole cooking. Any lingering doubts were put to rest for good in 1820 when Colonel Robert Gibbon Johnson declared that at noon on September 26, he would eat a bushel of tomatoes in front of the Boston courthouse. Thousands came to watch his painful demise. It was reported that he would foam at the mouth and thrash about; mothers kept their children close.

How disappointed they were when, instead of a distasteful death, he was well fed and fortified instead.

After a frigid beginning in North America the tomato burst onto the scene ready to make up for lost time. Ohio even made it the official state fruit. In North America, the tomato would undergo a second, more intensive period of domestication.

Industrialized tomatoes

With the rise of the canning industry and grocery chains, acres of tomatoes were now needed to supply the demand of consumers. They needed to all ripen at the same time, be of uniform shape and size, and be able to travel long distances without bruising or rot. Say hello to the red, round grocery store special, the tasteless and tough, nameless, faceless tomatoes found in grocery stores year round.

Changes in the plant occurred as various traits were selected for—larger and larger fruit sizes, a bush plant instead of a branching one. The long flowers, which are easier for insects to pollinate, changed to shorter flowers, which nearly assure self-fertilization. Hybrid cultivars of the tomato have dominated our gardens and plates for decades now. Hybrids are appealing to seed companies because growers must purchase seeds each year. Saving hybrid seeds brings mixed results, with possibly great differences from the parents.

With these developments we enter the tomato's most dejected period, modern times. Hybrids reign, ketchup was declared a vegetable in America in 1981 to justify budget cuts to school lunch programs, and, most deplorably, the genetically engineered tomato emerged. Designed not to soften,

even when fully ripe, the 'Flavr Savr' tomato was swiftly and appropriately rejected by frightened consumers, and pulled out of stores.

Back to the future

Even while the tomato was going through rough times, a torch still burned bright with promise for the future. As many people immigrated to the New World from the Old during the 19th and 20th centuries, they brought their favourite varieties of vegetables. They kept these alive in small communities and families, passing the seeds on from one generation to the next. These are heirlooms, precious and treasured varieties of vegetables. Names such as Black Krim, Amish Paste, German Head, Cherokee Purple, Sandia Gem, Bonny's Best and Moira create a story in one's mind as to their rich and personal history.

Heirloom tomatoes are special for many reasons. They are open-pollinated, so they grow true from seed. This means you can save your own seed every year and get your favourite each time, not having to rely upon the control of seed companies or corporate multinationals.

Their diversity is astounding, taking on many different colours and shapes, as well as flavour. The taste is something people value the most these days as the common tomato is tasteless. Some heirloom varieties are naturally resistant to certain insects and diseases, and can grow in many different locations and situations. Many thanks to those seed savers who have endeavoured with wisdom and foresight to a future which encourages diversity and sustainability.

Heirloom vegetable seeds may be found through dedicated

sources such as Seeds of Diversity, and many seed companies in Canada. Also take a look around your own community and see what excellent local varieties gardeners have been treasuring for many years.

Here in Prince Edward County, Ontario, many local organic growers and tomato enthusiasts gather in Milford at Vicki's Veggies for the annual Heirloom Hurrah! and tomato tasting on Labour Day weekend where all are invited to come and sample over a hundred varieties of heirloom tomatoes.

Jenna Empey is a young organic grower in Prince Edward County, Ontario, where tomatoes thrive. She is involved with the local chapter of COG as a chapter representative and treasurer, and participates as a member of the local Environmental Advisory Committee. There is some speculation among local folk that she is actually just a tomato in disguise.

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TO PRUNE OR NOT TO PRUNE?

By *Karyn Wright*

Should tomato plants be pruned, pinched back, or suckered (as some call it) to create a better and/or healthier plant? To answer this, you must first choose: (1) the type of tomato plant you want to grow (determinate or indeterminate), and (2) if you want your tomato plants to be neat and tidy or profuse and sprawling. This is determined by both pruning and staking procedures.

Staking of tomato plants can be quite elaborate with systems of caging, trellising and roping, or as simple as putting old coffee containers under the vines to keep the fruit off the ground. In this article, the focus is on pruning rather than staking.

Why prune

To prune or not to prune has always been a debate among seasoned tomato growers. Some think it's important to take out the suckers that form in the leaf crotches of growing plants. Other growers control the shape of the plants by allowing only one or two branches to grow.

If you don't prune, the plant will have a bountiful crop of leaves which allows it to grow a bountiful crop of tomatoes. The plant needs the leaves to manufacture all the components necessary to produce the best flavour in its fruit. It is notable that some of the finest flavoured tomatoes, such as the Brandywines, are not especially heavy producers. Their leaves are working hard to produce flavour rather than more tomatoes.

The extra foliage has the added benefit of protecting tomatoes from sunscald. However too many leaves can prevent air circulation and encourage disease. A healthy balance must be found.

Which ones to prune

If you are going to prune, prune only the indeterminate varieties. The determinates are naturally self-pruning and your crop will be reduced if you cut any branches off.

How to prune

Pruning the plant simply means removing the little shoots (or suckers) that grow in the crotch of the leaf stems. If you catch them small enough, a simple pinch between your fingers will remove the little sucker. If they are too big for pinching, carry a small sharp knife with you when touring the garden and cut them out cleanly. This type of pruning can be carried out throughout the summer.

Even if you normally don't prune your tomatoes, you might consider trimming near the end of the season. If the blossoms and small fruit are removed, the plant will then put all its energy into ripening the remaining fruit before frost.

The professionals speak

According to Jennifer Bennett in *The Tomato Handbook* (Firefly Books, Toronto, 1997), "Tomatoes grown on stakes must have at least some of the suckers removed. Left to grow, each sucker is potentially a new fruit-bearing shoot that requires its own stake. Removing suckers will definitely lower the