

HEIRLOOM TOMATOES

By Dan Jason

*“Only two things that money can’t buy
That’s true love and homegrown tomatoes!”*

I’m certain the author of these famous lyrics was referring to heirloom tomatoes and not hybrid ones. As far as I’m concerned, hybrids are just not on a par with true love!

Money can indeed buy hybrids but you can’t save the seed from hybrids because it won’t come true. That means the grower of hybrids has to spend money each year for new seed. The person who grows open-pollinated heritage varieties can take his or her tomato growing out of the realm of money by saving the seed. Through observant selection, the variety can be improved annually.

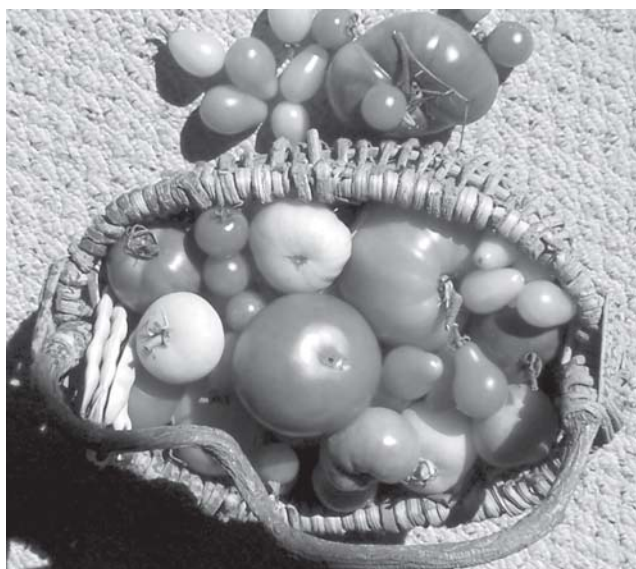
All the small Canadian seed companies that grow their own seeds feature tomatoes more than any other crop. Heirloom tomatoes are the most popular item at every Seedy Saturday across Canada.

I’ve been growing tomatoes commercially for 25 years and I’m convinced that hybrid tomatoes have nothing to recommend them over open-pollinated ones. Tomatoes have always done well for me and I have probably trialled over 500 different cultivars. I’ve often grown hybrids for comparison purposes. Most of the heirlooms have been as disease resistant as the hybrids. When blight has hit my tomatoes, only a few heirlooms were unaffected but never did any hybrid escape blight.

Over the years, I have frequently organized tomato taste tests where groups of people compare a number of varieties. Hybrid tomatoes have always been rated poor for flavour. People not only love the flavour of heirloom tomatoes, they also love the diversity of flavours, textures, sizes, shapes and colours.

You just don’t get the smorgasbord of tastes with hybrids. Most often, they are bred to be able to be shipped long distances and stay on store shelves without visibly deteriorating. The ones that are bred for disease resistance are perhaps better for large commercial operations prone to diseases in monoculture situations. In my experience though, hybrids aren’t any healthier than non-hybrids.

The hybrids that are touted as supersweet have



sweetness without any depth and complexity. I’d much rather eat a Gardener’s Delight cherry tomato than a Sweet 100 or a Sweet Million hybrid.

As a regular early red tomato, probably no hybrid is more recognized than Early Girl. I’d take Pollock heirloom tomato over Early Girl any day. Andy Pollock of Houston, B.C., has been refining his tomato for over 35 years. It is more productive, cold-tolerant and tastier than Early Girl by far.

In the realm of beefsteak tomatoes, I’ve never met a hybrid that could come close to a Brandywine heirloom.

I know there are people that say hybrids are superior to heirlooms but no hybrid tomato has convinced this tomato lover yet.

*“Homegrown tomatoes, homegrown tomatoes
What would life be without homegrown tomatoes?”*

Dan Jason is the owner of Salt Spring Seeds and the president of the Seed and Plant Sanctuary for Canada (www.seedsanctuary.com).

Photo credit: Karyn Wright