



# TOMATOES: Digging Deeper

BY RACHEL RAPHAEL

**I**n the vegetable garden, tomatoes rank as fast friends. With just the slightest bit of care—a sunny spot, occasional water and meager sucker pruning—tomatoes consistently reward even the most average gardener with speedy growth and fruit aplenty. But these seemingly compliant vegetable bedfellows can just as easily befuddle our green thumbs. Did your vibrant plants bear scant fruit? Did they succumb to blossom-end rot or the ruthless blights? Did your beefy heirlooms plump up but stay green? If these woeful tales ring true, or if you'd just like to hone your growing skills, then it's time to redefine your tomato persona. But first, you must lay aside your gardening hubris and jump inside the mind of a tomato.

## Keeping Heat in the Relationship

Just as in human relationships, it's essential to tune into your growing partner's needs for general success. In other words, do your research before assuming you're in the know. Sure, you know tomatoes "need sun," but how much and why? Gardeners with an anthropomorphic bent might hear something like this: "I'm from Andean South America, where it's scorching hot from sunrise to sundown. I simply thrive on heat. Tell you the truth, my roots and leaves struggle to survive if you plant me too early. And please wait until nights hover at 55°F or

my already short life will be riddled with disease and few kin to leave in my wake (and in your mouth)." In other words, tomatoes require a garden spot that sizzles.

Impatient gardeners who want to squeeze an early start out of their plants are inviting potential disaster. Just because the potential for frost has passed does not mean the soil is warm enough for a hot and healthy beginning. It's true that die-hard season-extenders rave about the new red plastic "mulch," which allows for safe early planting and a 12 percent to 20 percent increase in yield. But those who wish to keep it simple and natural should heed the advice of Luanna Helfman of Sunnyside Nursery in San Anselmo. "I tell customers to think Italy in the summer or walking comfortably in bare feet across the ground. But the public insists on planting too early." This is your tomato-growing watershed moment, and if you fudge this heat prerequisite, prepare for lackluster plants, second-rate fruit and possibly plant death.

## More Make-or-Break Issues

Upon committing to sunshine, the seasoned tomato grower will encounter several more key moments. Get off to a solid start by planting deeply to encourage a flurry of root production. Simply eyeball the top 25 percent of the main stem, snap away the branches beneath that point and dig a hole

## HEIRLOOM TOMATO CHOW CHOW

Recipe and photo courtesy Tyler Florence

Yield: serves 4-6

Time: 45 minutes

1 quart apple cider vinegar  
1 cup sugar  
3 tablespoons celery seed  
3 tablespoons mustard seeds  
1 1/2 tablespoons pickling spice  
1 tablespoon dry mustard  
1 tablespoon ground turmeric  
1 teaspoon salt  
1 1-inch piece of ginger, grated

2lbs firm heirloom tomatoes, mixed color and variety, cut into large chunks  
2 medium onions, sliced

Combine vinegar, sugar, celery seeds, mustard seeds, pickling spices, dry mustard, turmeric, salt and ginger in a large pot. Place over high heat and bring to a boil. Reduce heat; simmer for 15 minutes to extract the flavor of the spices. Return heat to high and add tomatoes and onions, stirring to coat everything evenly. Once the liquid begins to boil, immediately shut off the heat and allow mixture to cool to room temperature.



deep enough to accommodate the lower 75 percent of the plant. And be warned: If you've ever lost tomato plants to a soil-borne fungal disease (like early or late blight), planting in the same location is akin to burying the living. Don't do it!

Another hot—and divisive—topic is diet. If you ask three horticulturists for nutrition recommendations, as I did, expect a trio of diverse answers. A few basic truths do shine through, however: Prevent blossom-end rot by planting with lime or crushed oyster shell; fertilize early with potassium (K); and feed later with a blend of nitrogen (N) and phosphorous (P). Personally, I'm a minimalist, so I stick with this classic homebrew from planting time to late August: four parts cottonseed meal, one part dolomite lime, one part combination of bone meal and rock phosphate, and one part kelp meal. (See sidebar for additional suggestions.)

Your watering technique is the final lifeline that will buoy or sink your plants. First, please pour H<sub>2</sub>O cocktails directly into the soil—and do so consistently but infrequently. Wet foliage invites fungal foes (namely the brutal blights) that can decimate a plant practically overnight. And if you're the type of gardener who gets slap-happy with a hose, point it at the neighborhood kids instead: Tomatoes resent too much water. Yes, the plant will look lush and happy, but daily consumption encourages wimpy, shallow roots and watery, sugar-deficient fruit. Instead, invest in a thick layer of mulch, water deeply once or twice weekly during the growing season, then—once the plant has set fruit that is beginning to ripen—summon up your willpower and limit water to once every two to three weeks. This crucial step is the difference between bland tomatoes and rich, sugary, acidic ones.

### Drumroll: The Best Tomatoes

So now it's time to put your know-how to work on the "best" tomatoes, or rather the best of the bizarre. In my research, all it took was one look at the knockout photos of a Berkeley Tie

Dye or an Aunt Ruby's German Green to make me push aside my knee-jerk instinct to reach for the ho-hum red option. Toward that end, I've assembled an exciting list collated from the collective conscience of local nurseries. (See sidebar.)

If you're lucky enough to reside in one of our warmer microclimates, the choice is delightfully simple: Any tomato will thrive in your garden, even the late-season massive beefsteak types. But what about *Edible Marin & Wine Country* readers who live in the fog-laden microclimates in our tri-county wonderland? Choose your tomato wisely and stick with early types. "Be realistic about sun and weather limitations," says Barney Welsh, co-owner of the tiny but famous wholesale vegetable grower Forni-Brown-Welsh Gardens in Calistoga. "Stay away from larger heirlooms that require day after day of heat. Instead, stick with smaller, earlier types and disease-resistant hybrids that are bred specifically for cooler areas with shorter growing seasons."

Translation? Learn to embrace the easy-to-ripen cherry tomato. For many cherry lovers, Sun Gold reigns supreme; I'm eager to try its recently created relative the Sun Sugar, which reportedly resists cracking. If you need the extra disease resistance, look for the exceptional First Lady, Oregon Spring, Oregon Star and Siletz. Gardeners who demand heirloom varieties will adore the extremely early and high-yielding Stupice and the outrageously flavorful Moskovich.

So this summer, push beyond your default growing methods and take on the tomato challenge. With a tad more heat, a bit less water, and a loving sprinkle of the right food, this season may coax a bounty like never before.

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*Rachel Raphael was born into a family of avid cooks and gardeners, so it's no wonder the Marin native gravitated toward food and horticulture from an early age. As the owner of Letter & Leaf ([www.letterandleaf.com](http://www.letterandleaf.com)), she currently designs small-space gardens and containers that feature unusual botanicals and tasty edibles. Prior to that, Raphael was the heart and soul behind Smith and Hawken's weekly online column, Garden Guru.*



## FRESH TOMATO BLOODY MARY

Recipe and photo courtesy Tyler Florence

Yield: serves 4-6

Time: 10 minutes

### SEASONED SALT MIX:

- 1 teaspoon crushed celery seeds
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- 1 teaspoon coarse ground black pepper
- Splash lime juice

### FRESH TOMATO BLOODY MARY:

- 6 large heirloom tomatoes, cut into wedges
- 1 small English cucumber, roughly chopped
- 3 center ribs of celery, roughly chopped
- 1 anchovy fillet, roughly chopped
- 1-inch piece of fresh horseradish, peeled and minced
- 2 tablespoons flat leaf parsley leaves
- dash of hot sauce, or to taste
- dash of Worcestershire sauce, or to taste
- 1 to 1-1/2 oz of Vodka per cocktail, as desired
- 1 lime, cut into wedges for garnish
- Center ribs of celery, to serve with drinks

Prepare seasoned salt mix by combining crushed celery seed, salt and ground black pepper. Touch one point on the rim of the glass with lime juice and cover in seasoned salt mix. Set aside.

For Fresh Tomato Bloody Mary, combine tomatoes, cucumber, celery, anchovy, horseradish and parsley in a blender and puree completely. Season with Worcestershire sauce, hot sauce, salt and pepper. Blend once more to combine. Serve over vodka in prepared glasses garnished with a wedge of lime and a celery rib.

## THE ELUSIVE TOMATO DIET

Nutrition suggestions from local nurseries

Patrick Roques of Green Jeans Garden Supply in Mill Valley is a nutrition dynamo who demystifies even the tallest wall of fertilizers. "The main idea is to grow strong plants from the get-go by amending the soil with high-potassium (K) foods like K-Mag and palm ash. Calcium-rich crushed oyster shells are great in the planting hole to fend off blossom-end rot. Once plants are established, move to nitrogen (for green growth) and phosphorous (for flowers and fruit). To this end, I recommend the Down to Earth products Bio-Fish and Rock'n Chicken throughout the growing season."

Maureen Jensen of Van Winden's Pueblo Garden Center in Napa swears by one to two tablespoons of Epsom salts (magnesium sulfate) added to each hole at planting time. "I've been doing this for 35 years and I'm certain it increases the intensity and flavor of my tomatoes."

Kirsten Tripplett of Harmony Farm Supply & Nursery in Sebastopol recommends E.B. Stone Sure Start in the planting hole followed by regular doses of compost tea. "Here in the nursery, we make our own tea from worm castings. Gardeners can make their own simply by mixing a scoop of compost with water and letting it stew for a few days."

## BEST AND BIZARRE TOMATOES

Lucky for us, there's a fruitful relationship between color and flavor. Lighter colored yellowish fruits boast more sugar and less acid, while darker ones veer in the opposite direction; reds find themselves happily balanced in the middle. "Black" tomatoes—which are, in fact, more purple in color—regularly win taste tests given their naturally salt-and-pepper smokiness.

### YELLOW AND ORANGES

- Garden Peach (*tasty and slightly fuzzy*)
- Persimmon (*orange and meaty*)
- Striped German (*yellow marbled with pink*)
- Sun Gold and Sun Sugar (*super sweet, prolific cherry*)
- Yellow Brandywine (*Amish heritage*)

### GREENS

- Aunt Ruby's German Green (*beefsteak-y*)
- Berkeley Tie Dye (*the new "it" tomato, psychedelic flavor and color*)
- Green Zebra (*striped and tangy*)

### REDS

- Ace (*paste type*)
- Costoluto Genovese (*large*)
- Enchantment (*paste type*)
- First Lady (*early ripening, high yield*)
- Giant Syrian (*one-pound, heart-shaped*)
- Marmande (*slightly tart, French heritage*)
- Red Zebra (*red with gold stripes*)
- Stupice (*early ripening*)

### PURPLES AND BLACKS

- Black Krim (*rare, salty flavor*)
- Black Prince (*intensely flavored*)
- Cherokee Chocolate (*celebrity chef favorite*)
- Cherokee Purple (*large and luscious, smoky flavor*)
- Chocolate Cherry (*super productive*)
- Japanese Black Trifele (*juicy, prized Russian heritage*)