

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 H₂O 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.

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), 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.