



The TomatoMan

One Man's Quest to Preserve Heirloom Tomatoes Worldwide

BY DEBBIE MOOSE
PHOTO BY FRED THOMPSON

When Craig LeHoullier talks tomatoes, he's like a combination of Alice Waters and Bill Gates.

One minute, LeHoullier is making my mouth water with descriptions of heirloom tomato flavors. The next, he goes all techie about “open-source tomato development.”

I should expect no less from someone who, for nearly 20 years, has blended his quest for great tomato flavors from the past with his scientific background as a chemist and Ph.D. And who, for all that time, hasn't been able to park a car in the garage, or in the top half of the driveway, of his Raleigh home for all the seedlings, grow-lights and pots.

Thanks in large part to LeHoullier's obsession, heirloom varieties of tomatoes have gone from being rare oddities to starring on restaurant menus and in backyard gardens everywhere.

The dark, rich Cherokee Purple, which has become one of the best-known heirlooms, owes its fame—possibly even its existence—to this tomato nut. LeHoullier was recognized for rediscovering and preserving the variety by Slow Food USA, which named Cherokee Purple to its US Ark of Taste.

LeHoullier's collection contains about 700 heirloom tomato varieties—and continues to grow. And that doesn't count the peppers and eggplant he grows as well.

Why tomatoes? It's all about the flavor and the intellectual challenge.

“There's so much variety in tomatoes,” LeHoullier says. “There are great appearance differences, from pea-sized red to giant striped. Since I was a biology major at Dartmouth, I have a major interest in genetic diversity. And the flavors—acid, sweet, bland, fruity. They're just delicious.”

Heirlooms are old varieties grown before tomatoes were required to travel long distances, sit in supermarkets for weeks and still look good. They're the tomatoes of summer backyards, not of January produce bins. Most must be picked when dead ripe and eaten quickly, which is why they all but disappeared with the growth of agribusiness.

But what we gained in convenience we lost in flavor. Now, many chefs, gardeners and home cooks have rediscovered heirlooms.

LeHoullier spent time in the garden with his grandfather as a child, and gardened off-and-on before moving to Raleigh to take a job as a chemist at Glaxo. The more that he found out about heirlooms, and the stories behind them, the more interested he became in preserving and perpetuating them.

For more information on heirloom tomatoes:

Craig LeHoullier's web page: www.nctomatoman.com

Information on the dwarf tomato project:
<http://dwarftomatoproject.net>

More on tomatoes: www.tomatoville.com

Seed Savers Exchange, which focuses on a number of vegetables: www.seedsavers.org

He joined organizations such as Seed Savers Exchange that promote swapping seeds, and made contacts.

There were the seeds that came in the mail from a tomato called Anna Russian that traced its history to a Russian immigrant.

And that Cherokee Purple. LeHoullier received the seeds in the mail from a man in Tennessee. A note with the seeds said that the man wanted to share the seeds from this plant, which had no name but that he believed to be one that the Cherokee Indians grew in the area a century earlier. LeHoullier grew out the seeds, and found the flavor and purple color—a rarity in the tomato world—made the tomato a winner. He named it Cherokee Purple in honor of the story of its origin.

He recommends Cherokee Purple, Black Cherry and Brandywine for first-time heirloom tomato gardeners. He says he has never lost those to disease and speculates they have some natural resistance to tomato diseases that are common here. But even so, it's not easy to grow tomatoes in North Carolina.

"With the drought last year, it was the worst season I've had in 17 years," he says. "It was like Cecil B. DeMille staged the epic destruction in our garden."

Since retiring from the company a year or so ago, he has been a full-time "Tomatoman"—his nickname among others of like obsession. LeHoullier has been able to go full-time into a project he has been working on with an Australian gardener for three years.

The project is taking varieties of heirloom tomatoes and working to make the plants grow smaller while still bearing flavorful, large-sized fruit.

Heirlooms typically grow eight to 10 feet tall, he says, making them unsuitable for the increasing number of people who garden in containers. Most commercial hybrid dwarf plants that grow well in pots bear small tomatoes, and the flavor options are few for heirloom lovers.

Through the slow process of pollinating and growing out seeds, he's combining the user-friendliness of dwarf plants with the awesome flavor of heirloom varieties. The goal is to end up with plants that are no more than three to four feet high but with larger size fruit. He hopes to have plants ready for sale in a year or two.

Although he sells plants at the State Farmers Market in Raleigh and to farms, LeHoullier's purpose has never been to make a ton of money or get his tomato plants in every garden catalog. He simply wants people to give heirloom varieties a chance in home gardens.

And he believes in tomatoes for all; that gardeners should be able to save the seeds and grow plants that will produce the same original fruit.

Many popular hybrids, such as the sweet cherry tomato Sungold, won't do this—meaning that you must pay the company producing it for more plants. Such practices also threaten plant diversity.

He also has donated plants to the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle, which is helping low-income people learn to raise vegetables.

His reputation as "Tomatoman" has led him to teach classes in growing and cooking tomatoes at A Southern Season in Chapel Hill and to host tomato dinners at Zely & Ritz in Raleigh.

For the last seven years, LeHoullier and his wife, Susan, have organized "Tomatopalooza" each summer.

"It's an event by the tomato obsessed, for the tomato obsessed," he says.

The guest list primarily consists of his past customers. The price of admittance: Tomatoes. Guests bring the best of their crops, which are sliced, placed on plates and labeled, then organized by color and size. Then, the tasting begins. Swiping seeds to take home for sprouting is not only allowed, but expected.

Tomatopalooza is also a time for LeHoullier to get feedback on taste and appearance of the newest tomatoes from the dwarf project (no seed-saving on those, though).

Will there be a book? Maybe—he's been thinking about it. There'll be more tomatoes, for sure

"I feel like I'm on a journey with no clear destination," LeHoullier says. "I just want to get out the word about the tomatoes." *eP*

Freelance writer and lifelong North Carolinian Debbie Moose of Raleigh has written four cookbooks, most recently *Wings*. She writes two columns in *The News and Observer*, and contributes to several publications. Read more at her blog at www.debbiemoose.com.

