

HEIRLOOM TOMATOES

What to know and how to grow them

BY KARAN GREENWALD



There's nothing quite like the flavor of a freshly picked heirloom tomato

What is an heirloom tomato?

The most accepted definition is a tomato that must be open pollinated, has been grown for at least 50 years, or was introduced before 1940. Heirloom seeds have been saved and passed down from generation to generation. Currently, there are more than 7,500 heirloom tomatoes listed in the *Seed Savers' Exchange Yearbook*. So, what should you grow?

First, decide how you'd like to use your tomatoes and then choose between determinate and indeterminate types. Determinate plants are short, bloom early in the season, and most of their fruit ripens at the same time, making them good for sauces and other recipes. They are also bushy and do not require as much staking as indeterminates. Indeterminate vines have leafy shoots at the tips that continue to grow, flower, and set fruit until the vine is exhausted. An indeterminate has a long growing season and is generally more productive and flavorful than the determinate heirloom, so you can enjoy them all season long in salads and sandwiches as they ripen. Indeterminates can grow vines of 15 to 19 feet and should be staked/caged to produce higher quality fruit.

Start the seeds eight to nine weeks before planting. Plant after the last chance of frost but when the ground temperature is at least 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Tomatoes can be planted in the ground or in pots. Both work equally well as long as the plant gets a minimum of six hours of morning sun per day. It is almost impossible to successfully grow a tomato in less sun. Potted plants will need to be watered more often and may require more frequent fertilizing.

Tomatoes planted in the ground should be set at least three feet apart. Prepare the soil by digging a hole the depth of the root ball plus the length of the stem to the third set of leaves from the top. Remove all leaves below that point. Mix some compost



Striped Green Zebra



Yellow Pear
Isis Candy



Red Beefsteak

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HEIRLOOMS TO TRY

INDETERMINATES

Black Plum Cherry Deep mahogany with dusky-green shoulders; unique sweet tangy flavor

Isis Candy Cherry Golden yellow with red marbling; one of the sweetest and most striking cherry tomatoes

Brown Berry Cherry

Mahogany (brick-red) brown; juicy, semi-sweet, rich flavors with a slightly acidic finish

Brandywine Amish beefsteak that dates back to 1885; considered to be the world's best-tasting tomato

Big Rainbow Beefsteak with marbled red inside flesh at bottom; mild, sweet flavor

DETERMINATES

Marmande Beefsteak with scarlet fruit; delicious flavor and firm meaty flesh

Neves Azorean Red Huge, deep red beefsteak tomato; terrific, bold, complex flavors

Black Sea Man Brown-black beefsteak with pink shoulders; rich tangy flavor

and/or tomato food into the hole and fill with water. After the water has completely drained, pinch the leaves that will be below ground off the plant, loosen the root ball soil, and set the plant in the hole. Loosely fill the hole with soil. Don't pack it down. The soil needs to breathe. Leave an 18 to 24 inch (in diameter) shallow bowl around the plant for watering. If you have an exuberant plant that has already started to flower, pick off the flowers. The plant needs to put its energy into growing roots. If you are going to cage/stake the plant, do that now to avoid disrupting roots later. Give the plant a good soaking. A layer of mulch will help retain moisture, ward off weeds, and cut down on watering.

Potted plants require at least a 15-gallon container to allow for root growth. Always plant with potting soil, not dirt from the yard. Measure the height of the plant with root ball and stem up to the top three sets of leaves and fill the pot with potting soil. Add fertilizer and mix thoroughly. Pinch off the bottom leaves, put the plant in, fill with soil, cage/stake, and water.

Plants should be fed when flowers have formed and again when the fruit has set. Any tomato fertilizer can be used; follow the label directions. Overfertilizing will not produce more tomatoes—just big plants with no fruit.

More plants die from overwatering than underwatering. Look at your plants early in the morning. If they look wilted, water them. Don't water in the middle of the day. This wastes water and can stress the plant. Water directly into the trench or the pot. Avoid wetting the plant, which encourages disease. If you can only check your plants in the evening, wait until morning to water them. Watering at night encourages mold and mildew.

UC Master Gardener Karan Greenwald began gardening with her grandmother at the age of two. Three years ago, she was officially crowned The Tomato Queen by the Point Loma Garden Club. ✨