



# 10 heirloom tomatoes to try now

**Heirloom tomatoes have a delicious taste and an elegant look, and they're not hard to grow if you follow a few simple tips.**

**by Teresa O'Connor**

**T**ired of the same old tomato? Then it's time to try heirlooms. They come in a wide variety of colors, tastes, sizes, and shapes—from tangy 'Green Zebra' and mild 'Old Ivory Egg' to sweet 'Caspian Pink' and salty 'Black Krim'. Many heirlooms have been passed down for generations, so they have interesting stories as well.

It only takes one bite into an heirloom tomato to understand their popularity. Compared to common store-bought hybrids, which are bred for shipping and traveling long distances instead of for flavor, heirlooms are incredibly delicious and tender.

Heirlooms are as beautiful as they are tasty. **Pictured here:** 'Cherokee Purple', 'Brandywine', 'Valencia', 'German Green', and 'Green Zebra'.



## What's an heirloom?

Getting experts to agree on the definition of an heirloom tomato isn't easy. Some say the variety must be at least 50 years old; others say 100 years. Most agree, however, that heirloom tomatoes come from open-pollinated plants with seeds that reproduce true to type. If you collect the seeds of a hybrid like 'Big Boy' or 'Early Girl' and plant them the next year, the plants that come up won't be the same as the parent plant. They may have some characteristics of the plant you bought the previous year, but they won't be identical. Unlike hybrids, heirlooms' seeds breed true from one generation to the next, which means you can save them for the next growing season.

## How to grow heirlooms

Heirloom tomatoes have some challenges. They tend to ripen slower than modern hybrids. That's why gardeners with short growing seasons should consider early varieties like 'Stupice'. Heirlooms don't always yield as much fruit as hybrids, either. If you want lots of tomatoes, select prolific varieties like 'Chocolate Cherry Tomato'. Or grow a few extra plants.

Heirlooms also are more susceptible to diseases than hybrid varieties. In fact, hybrids often have letters after their names (for example, V for verticillium) to note their resistance to various diseases.

Fortunately, you can grow great heirloom tomatoes with proper gardening principles. And these delicious tomatoes are definitely worth a little extra care.

Select a spot with at least six hours of sunlight daily. Prepare soil with organic matter like well-rotted compost. Leave space between plants to encourage air circulation. Plant tomatoes and related plants like peppers, eggplants, and

potatoes in different locations each year to discourage pathogens that might overwinter in the soil.

Heirlooms are typically sprawling, indeterminate plants. Stake them or support them in cages to keep fruit and foliage off the ground.

Irrigate deeply and consistently, especially during dry periods, to avoid common heirloom problems like cracking fruit and blossom-end rot. Use soaker hoses or drip irrigation to avoid wetting foliage, which can lead to fungal diseases. Water early so the plant dries before evening.

As with all tomatoes, add a layer of organic mulch around plants to reduce weeds and retain moisture. Mulch also helps prevent the spread of early blight and other diseases by keeping spores from splashing on plants.

Remove garden debris, leaf litter, and weeds regularly. Sterilize tools with a solution made of one part bleach to nine parts water. If you smoke, wash your hands and clothes before touching plants so you don't spread tobacco mosaic virus.

## Favorites

Among the hundreds of heirlooms available, here are ten tomatoes to try now. All of them are indeterminate, which means their fruit continues to set until plants are killed by cold temperatures.

### 'Black Krim'

This rare variety comes from the isle of Krim in the Black Sea. Medium-large maroon fruit has green shoulders and green gel around seeds. Naturally salty, these delicious tomatoes are ideal for slicing, salads, and cooking. Suitable for containers and patio gardens. 80 days.

### 'Brandywine'

A wildly popular Amish variety that dates back to 1885. Large pink beefsteak



## how heirlooms happen

When you grow heirloom tomatoes, you get fruit that tastes great and looks elegant on a plate. You also get the opportunity to collect seeds and plant them again next year. Collecting heirloom seeds is an important way to preserve our crop diversity and culinary heritage for future generations.

Heirlooms are classified in four ways:

### Family heirlooms

Most common. These seeds are passed down from one family (or community) to another for generations.

### Commercial heirlooms

Open-pollinated plants grown commercially before hybrids came along after World War II. Seeds were saved and are still passed along, even if the company is no longer in business.

### Created heirlooms

Created by crossing two or more known hybrids and/or heirlooms. Seeds stay true to type.

### Mystery heirlooms

The result of the natural crossing of two heirlooms, when only one parent is known.

fruits with excellent old-fashioned flavor grow on prolific plants. Other cultivars (such as 'Purple Brandywine', 'Black Brandywine', and 'Pink Brandywine') share the name, partly due to mislabeling or inadvertent crossings between plants. 90 days.

### 'Caspian Pink'

This Russian heirloom was discovered along the Caspian Sea after the Cold War. The prolific variety yields large pink tomatoes with mild, sweet flavor. Tomatoes don't fall from vines when ripe; snip them off instead. Performs well in cool climates. 80 days.

### 'Cherokee Purple'

Originally grown by Cherokee Indians, this heirloom is more than 100 years old. Medium-sized, dusty rose-colored fruit has a complex, somewhat smoky flavor. This variety resists diseases better than other heirlooms. Tolerates hot temperatures. 80 days.

### 'Chocolate Cherry Tomato'

Deliciously sweet, deep purple cherry tomatoes grow nonstop on this productive plant. Harvest fruit fully mature or let ripen indoors. Unusual color adds excitement to salads and sauces. 70 days.

### 'Green Zebra'

The yellowish green-striped, tennis-ball-sized fruit on this heirloom wins fans for its tangy, well-balanced taste. Released by Tater Mater Seeds in 1983, the open-pollinated cultivar was developed from four heirloom varieties. Tolerates cool, foggy conditions. 75 days.

### 'Hillbilly'

This heirloom hails from the hills of West Virginia in the 1880s. Huge, heavily ribbed, orange-yellow fruit is streaked with red. When cut, the pretty fruit makes a starburst pattern. Low acid. 85 days.

### 'Old Ivory Egg'

Sweden was originally home to this rare plum-type tomato, which resembles a chicken egg. Pale ivory fruit turns creamy yellow as it ripens on prolific plants. Mild, sweet flavor is well suited for salads, salsas, and sauces. 80 days.



'Brandywine', which dates back to 1885, is one of the most well-known heirloom tomatoes.



### **'Stupice'**

From the Czech Republic comes this hardy, cold-tolerant heirloom (pronounced "stu-peek-a"), which yields small red fruit that ripens faster than many heirlooms. Famous for its delicious sweet/acid flavor, 'Stupice' grows well in cold climates. 52 days.

### **'Yellow Pear'**

This heirloom produces bright yellow, pear-shaped fruit that grows up to 2 inches long. Fruit is so sweet that it's nicknamed "garden candy." Vigorous plant bears large harvests until frost. Suitable for containers. 75 days. 🍅

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For tomato sources, see Resource Guide on page 58.

For delicious fruit and unusual colors and shapes, try 'Stupice' (**above left**) and 'Yellow Pear' (**above right**).

### **WebExtra**

For five more favorite heirlooms, visit [www.gardeningclub.com](http://www.gardeningclub.com) and click on WebExtra.