

Heirloom Tomato Trial 2009

There are hundreds if not thousands of named heirloom and open pollinated tomato varieties that tempt us each year as we look over what varieties that we would like to grow each Spring. The Oklahoma Horticulture Study Group, Inc. decided to conduct a trial to find varieties that are better suited and help make choices easier. Of course a true trial will involve at least two to three years testing, however our results are worth publishing as some varieties will no doubt perform most years.

The 2009 growing season didn't quite cooperate as we had hoped, however we had a great year to evaluate several varieties of heirloom and open pollinated tomatoes under slightly adverse conditions. Our target date for planting our tomato transplants was the first week of May. We didn't get them planted until the last week of May. However, the results were amazing as we found several varieties of tomatoes that did wonderful.

We grew out around 100 different tomato varieties with plans to grow more different ones during the 2010 season. Below are some of the best ones in production and flavor.

Those of you that have not tried some of the Purple/Black tomatoes are really missing out on some of the best-flavored varieties. Yes the color is a bit odd, but once you take a few bites, you are hooked. We will start our list with these varieties as we had several that are sure to please and were among our favorites.

Black/Purple varieties

These varieties will ripen with a dark burgundy, garnet color. The reason for this is that when most tomatoes ripen, they lose the green chlorophyll and gradually give way to the ripe color of pink, red, yellow or orange. The black/ purple varieties never lose the green chlorophyll and the red ripe color gets blended with the green to give a brownish red color.

By now everyone should know about Cherokee Purple (CP). This tomato variety has become one of the all time best-known heirloom tomatoes across America and is still a number one selling variety. It has good production for an heirloom and has a rich tomato flavor that lends itself to all kinds of uses. The main drawback is that Cherokee Purple has the tendency to crack making storage a challenge. However, it has a great tomato flavor that is loved by tomato growers everywhere. For this reason we are using Cherokee Purple as the standard by which we compare the other dark varieties.

JD's Special C-Tex. All we can say is WOW. This was probably one of the most productive black tomato varieties for 2009. It has great flavor that rivals Cherokee Purple. Many people even say they like it better than Cherokee Purple. We didn't have the cracking associated with Cherokee Purple and the vines stayed healthy and continued to produce all season. We feel that this could possibly push CP out of first place. It's that good.

Indian Stripe. Most heirloom tomato experts consider this heirloom a strain of the Cherokee Purple. It was very productive, didn't crack as bad as CP and has great flavor. It was smaller than CP with fruit in the 10 to 12 ounce range but produced more fruits per cluster than CP. The fruit color when ripe is not as dark as CP.

Sara Black. This German heirloom lived up to its reputation for being an excellent variety. Good production of medium sized 8 to 12 ounce fruit with excellent, rich deep flavor, some sweetness and smokiness and extra complex flavors. Some say this is the best flavored black. We rate it up at the top. We didn't experience any cracking; however it is reported to have some slight cracking depending on the season.

Spudakee. This is a potato leafed version of Cherokee Purple. In all respects it is just like CP, however we had slightly better production with less cracking. We have found that in most cases potato leafed tomato varieties are better producing, better disease resistance and overall better plants. If you grow CP, give Spudakee a try and judge for yourself.

Gary 'O Sena We were blown away with this tasty, beautiful potato leafed tomato. It made some of the most beautiful sliced tomatoes with a rich deep garnet red color we have ever seen. Large 14 to 16 ounce fruit ripen in about 70 to 75 days and have a great rich flavor. Some can even weigh more than a pound.

Red Varieties.

While there are many red tomato varieties and many good ones, we were thrilled to find some "new to us" varieties that did exceptionally well. We have always known that Brandywine Red, and Sioux have been some of our best-rated red varieties of open pollinated/heirloom tomatoes. But we were excited to find even more to add to the list. We hope you will try some of these varieties that were amazing.

Neve's Azorean Red. This was truly our best "new to us" red variety for 2009. The vines were amazingly healthy and disease free. It had great production and good flavor. This heirloom tomato produced large beefsteak type fruit in the 10 to 16 ounce range. It produced beautiful crack free fruit with little to no culls.

Box Car Willie. We knew that this tomato is a great variety for Oklahoma. However, We feel it needs mentioning again. It produced very well with crack free, blemish free fruit. Box Car Willie averages medium size fruit in the 6 to 12 ounce range.

Mule Team. Mule team is very similar to Box Car Willie. Large, up to 1-pound fruit with great flavor and good production.

Bloody Butcher. This potato leafed variety was our first tomato to ripen. It can ripen in as little as 55 days. Not a big tomato but was very flavorful. 1 to 3 ounce salad type fruit that closely resembles the variety Stupice. Deep dark red color. For those that "Must" have the first ripe tomato on the block.

Herman's Special. This was a new variety sent to us by Dr. Carolyn Male author of *100 Heirloom Tomatoes for the American Garden*. It was a very productive Red tomato in the 10 to 14 ounce range. Blemish and crack free. Makes a good container plant.

Magnum Beefsteak. This large red beefsteak had good production and very healthy vines that resisted disease and insects better than some. Good flavor. The vines were very vigorous but remain shorter than most and might be a good choice for growing in containers.

Bulgarian Triumph. We were very pleased with this Bulgarian family heirloom. 2-4 oz fruit with excellent sweet flavor, very good yield, one of our favorite small red tomatoes. Tomatoes are in clusters of 5 to 6.

Mountain Princess. This tomato had a very good yield of 3 to 6 ounce fruit with good flavor. Makes a great slicer and canning tomato too.

Pink Varieties

The most popular pink variety for flavor is the Legendary Brandywine. However it has the reputation for very low production, especially here in Oklahoma. Pink varieties have clear skin, while red varieties have yellow skin. Once sliced on a plate, you really can't tell much difference in color between the two.

Earl's Faux This is a potato leaf Heirloom tomato just like Brandywine. It was similar in taste to brandywine, but had good production. The only draw back we found is that it did split after a long dry spell followed by a heavy rain. Fruits picked as they start to flush color and allowed to ripen in the kitchen will prevent the splitting.

Randy's Brandy. This variety has the brandywine flavor and great production of 4 to 6 ounce fruit. Randy's Brandy was selected from Brandywine Cherry (another "Must Grow" variety) for size by Randy Fleming of Coweta, Oklahoma.

Royal Hillbilly. Royal Hillbilly is one of the varieties that have become a mainstay in the garden now. It was developed by the late Darrell Merrell of Tulsa, OK and is getting rave reviews all across the U.S. It is dependable and produces an abundance of tomatoes on smaller growing vines.

Yellow/Orange Varieties

Kellogg's Breakfast. This gold/orange variety was simply wonderful and produced an abundance of large fruit with excellent flavor.

Kentucky Beefsteak This new to us variety produced a good yield of 0.5-1 lb orange beefsteak fruit, with very good production and flavor.

T. C. Jones 8-12 oz light yellow, some with pink blush or striping at the blossom end. Very juicy, mild and sweet.

Orange Minsk This variety was sent to us by Dr. Carolyn Male. She received it from a tomato collector in Minsk, Belarus. We were very pleased with the production and flavor. It produced a beautiful Orange tomato with good production and flavor.

And last are the Green When Ripe (GWR) varieties. We only had one “Stand Out” variety this year, but plan to grow many more in the 2010 trial.

Grub’s Mystery Green. This tomato produced an amazing amount of delicious fruit in the medium size range. It did change when ripe from green to a light gold skin color, but when sliced, it was lime green with a zesty, rich flavor.

Oklahoma Horticulture Study Group Plant Sale

Some of the above varieties (with dozens more) will be available from the Oklahoma Horticulture Study Groups Spring Plant Sale April 30, 2011, from 8:00 am until 4:00 pm or sold out. The location of the sale to be announced. The group will also have many other types of vegetable and herbs plants including Sweet Potato slips.

For more information contact OKHortStudyGroup@aol.com or DuckCreekFarms@aol.com

.

By Gary V. Schaum former OSU Extension Horticulturist, and director of the Oklahoma Horticulture Study Group, Inc,