

IN SERCH OF THE PERFECT TOMATO PLANT

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Q: What is the best tomato to grow in Redding?

A: This can depend a little on your definition of the perfect tomato. For some gardeners it is all about the flavor but for others it may be about the reliability of a tomato crop.

If you fall in the flavor camp. Then one of the heirloom varieties of tomato maybe your favorite tomato. One of the main problems with growing heirloom tomato varieties is an increased susceptibility to disease and this is why some gardeners choose to grow F1 Hybrid tomatoes. Tomato varieties that are F1 hybrid are not considered heirloom tomatoes but can be more reliable producers and are more disease resistant. This disease resistance is accomplished by crossing two or more varieties with desirable traits. Such hybrids are sometimes trademarked or patented, and the retailer must then pay a royalty to sell or grow the seed. Hybrid tomatoes are often labeled regarding their disease resistance. For example, the exceptionally popular F1 hybrid ‘Early Girl’ tomato is resistant to “F,” Fusarium wilt, and “V,” Verticillium wilt. Other tomatoes may be labeled “N” for nematode resistance or “T” (or sometimes “TMV”) indicating tobacco mosaic virus resistance.

When planting heirloom tomatoes you can reduce the chance of disease by not planting in the same spot you’ve recently grown tomatoes or their relatives—potatoes, peppers, and eggplant. As with any tomato, set tomato plants deep with soil right up to the bottom leaves; this encourages the growth of additional roots along the stems for a stronger plant. Water carefully to prevent splashing soil onto the leaves, or better yet, drip irrigate. If you are still troubled with diseases, try planting in large pots or barrels with clean, bagged soil from a garden center or nursery.

Another way to enjoy heirloom tomatoes is the fairly recent development of growing grafted plants. These tomato plants, available through mail-order or at the local nurseries, are created by attaching the top part of one plant on to a different, more vigorous disease resistant rootstock. You get the flavor of the heirloom but the disease resistance of the F1 hybrid.

If you are more interested in getting a reliable crop from your tomato plants then you may want to consider planting determinate varieties such as Early Girl F1, Celebrity F1, Ace, Roma F1, and Orange Blossom. Determinate varieties set fruit once they reach a certain number of days in growth and are less likely to be influenced by weather conditions. Redding weather presents some challenges for tomato plants. Early in the growing season we tend to have big temperature differences between day and night, sometimes more than a 50 degree difference. Tomato plants do not like this and will not set fruit. Later in the growing season it just gets HOT. When this happens the pollen on the male flower of tomato becomes sterile so again no fruit. Indeterminate varieties tend to not set fruit if temperatures are not ideal and this is why you may get a large crop of tomatoes late in the season just before frost.

If you have a favorite tomato that you grow every year please let us know at mastergardener@ShastaCollege.edu

We are working on creating a list of tomatoes that do well in our Redding heat and have great flavor too.