

Heirlooms!

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UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County

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The heirloom tomato has an interesting history. There is evidence that the origins of the tomato are somewhere in the Andes Mountains, on a wild plant with tiny berries that were pretty much overlooked. European explorers probably carried them on their travels along with other plants they discovered. My own grandfather, who was born in Wales and immigrated to the U.S. in the early 20th century, would not eat tomatoes. He thought they were poisonous since they are members of the Nightshade family.

Farmers markets are a wonderful place to see the abundance of heirloom tomatoes. They are usually laid out on stands showing their stripes and colors ranging from black, red, green, often with shades of pink. Some are dainty, others are lobed and large, many are oddly shaped and often asymmetrical. They don't typically show up in retail markets because of their irregularity of shape and color; but because of this, when they are in grocery stores – they fetch premium prices. For many, the price is well worth it, as they are among the most flavorful and tasty of all tomatoes.

Local nurseries usually sell plant starts, offering plenty of choice for these scrumptious fruits of the vine. There are also a large variety of heirlooms available from seed, which offer even more choices. Of course, there will be plenty of tomatoes available at the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County Edibles Plant Sale on April 16th. The sale is held at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville, behind the El Dorado Center - Folsom Lake College. The sale is from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. and will offer many edible plants including herbs.

My complex floral/vegetable garden is ultimately a tomato garden because all of us eagerly look forward to the summer crop. Depending upon the weather and other mysterious factors, I can expect a glorious harvest or frustration and disappointment in a modest crop. Regardless, those tomatoes will be absolutely delicious.

Heirlooms are open pollinated by insects, producing seeds that can be saved to reproduce the qualities of the strain, provided the plant hasn't been cross pollinated. When saving seeds, choose from the best tomatoes available. The result will be quality tomatoes next season. In contrast to heirlooms, hybrid tomatoes are the product of controlled crossbreeding of two different varieties of the same plant in order to produce the best qualities of the tomato such as size, disease resistance, yield, color, etc. However, if seeds from a hybrid tomato are saved, they will not reproduce the same tomato, but instead will resemble one of the parent tomatoes used for hybridizing.

Because of their unique colors, shapes, and sizes, and the marketing techniques started in the 1980's and 1990's, many types of heirlooms were brought to the attention of the public, mainly

at farmer's markets. Restaurants, especially upscale ones, began using heirloom tomatoes. Articles began appearing in newspapers and magazines, home gardeners began growing them, and the humble tomato grew up. Tomato aficionados sought out different varieties, sharing and trading seeds, and here we are today – the recipients of all those hundreds of seeds and plants from which to choose.

Master Gardener classes are offered monthly throughout the county. You can find our class schedule at: http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public_Education_Classes/?calendar=yes&g=56698, and recorded classes on many gardening topics here: http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public_Education/Classes/.

The Sherwood Demonstration Garden is open Fridays and Saturdays from 9 a.m. -noon until March through October. We do close in case of rain, please check our website for details https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/Demonstration_Garden/

Mark your calendar for our annual plant sales in April! Edible plant sale; including fruit, veggies and herbs will be on Saturday, April 16, 2022 8:00AM · 2:00PM. Choose your favorite edibles and shop our incredible tomato selection grown and cared for locally by Master Gardener volunteers! The ornamental plant sale will take place on Saturday, April 30, 2022 8:00AM · 2:00PM. We will have a huge selection of trees, shrubs, grasses, succulents, native and perennial plants. Location: Sherwood Demonstration Garden 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville. <http://ucanr.edu/edcsale>

Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard to answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the “Ask a Master Gardener” option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. We'll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news.