

# HEIRLOOM TOMATOES

If you are a tomato lover, you are dreaming of next year's crop—just like me. The first seed catalogs have already arrived in the mail, and one is only for tomatoes! December or early January is the time to order seeds in order to ensure that the variety you really want to grow will be available for your garden.



Heirloom tomatoes definitely taste better. These tomatoes have the “just take the salt shaker to the garden with you” motivation for me. Heirlooms are juicy, colorful, and full of flavor. A platter of green, orange, yellow, red, pink, and dark purple tomato slices is my definition of gourmet.

Seeds from heirloom tomatoes have been saved and handed down from one generation to the next. Some sources define heirlooms as at least 100 years old, others say 50 years. These seeds do pre-date the widespread use of hybrid tomatoes in the 1970's. Hybrid tomatoes were developed to be resistant to disease and to ship well to markets at a great distance. Somewhere in that hybridization process, a lot of the flavor was lost. Commercial growers go for hybrids that ship well and produce uniform fruit and ripening with maximum disease resistance.

Heirloom tomatoes must be open-pollinated, or grow true from seed. These plants can produce seed from this season's plants that will produce seedlings just like the parent plant. Open pollination is done by the wind or insects, without any human intervention.



The cultivars of heirloom tomatoes vary in color, shape and size. As with any tomato variety, certain heirlooms produce and thrive better in different zones. Parker County, located in North Central Texas, has an average last frost date of March 17. It is important to wait until after that date to put tomato transplants in the ground, unless they can be protected from frost. The other consideration for our area is that the night temperatures can increase very quickly. In April 2008, the night temperatures went from the 50's to the 80's in one week. This is important because tomatoes generally will not set

fruit after night temperatures reach the middle 80-degree range. 2008 was not a good tomato year in Parker County for that reason.

In general, tomatoes that produce a mid-size fruit produce best in our area. Cherry tomatoes are almost always very productive. The more unusual of the Heirloom varieties also do well in our zone, and include the whites, greens, and blacks. Some of my favorite heirloom tomato cultivars

include Cherokee Purple, Green Zebra, Amish Paste, Nyagous, San Marzano, Yellow Pear and Black Krim. Other cultivars that do well in our area (and I will try in the next few years) are Eva Ball's Purple, Aunt Ruby's German Johnson, Manyel (yellow), Soldacki, Red Pear, Green Grape, Pink Ice, Plum Lemon, Druzba, Jaune Flamme, Riesentraube and Opalka.

As with any tomato seed, start indoors six to eight weeks before the average last frost date for your area. Use a moistened starting mix and separate container for each variety. Fill the container with the mix, place seeds on top, and cover with ¼ inch of starting mix. Lightly firm the surface and water again gently. Water every day or two so that the mixture does not dry out. It is a good idea to label every container with the variety.

Once the seed has germinated, make sure that the plant has plenty of light, 12-16 hours per day. When the seedling has two sets of leaves, transplant it to its own pot (if you did not start out with individual pots). If you start your seeds very early, you may need to move the seedling into a larger container when it outgrows its pot. Be sure to "harden off" the tomato plant before planting it into the garden. Put the plant outside in the shade for a week or so, bringing it back inside at night. This will make a stronger plant for the garden.

Dillard's Feed & Seed Store, located on North Main Street in Weatherford, carries heirloom tomato transplants each year. They normally have a good selection starting in mid-March. Stuart Nursery on Fort Worth Highway in Weatherford also sells heirloom tomato transplants. The Weatherford Farmers Market is another source for these plants.

If you order heirloom seeds, these are some reliable sources that are my favorites:

Baker Creek Heirloom Seed: [www.rareseeds.com](http://www.rareseeds.com)  
Seed Savers Exchange: [www.seedsavers.org](http://www.seedsavers.org)  
Seeds of Change: [www.seedsofchange.com](http://www.seedsofchange.com)

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