

GREEN INVESTMENT – old style

- By Robin Reily



Tomato Aspects

'Knowledge' is knowing that a tomato is a fruit; 'Wisdom' is not putting it in a fruit salad.

For effort invested compared to results obtained there is no better crop than the tomato. While rabbits devour many of our young plants they leave them untouched.

Tomatoes are part of a large family (Solanaceae) that includes many poisonous members like Deadly Nightshade and Tobacco so maybe the rabbits give the whole family a wide pass.

Like, the other family members, peppers and potatoes, tomatoes have their origins in Peru and Mexico where Inca and Mayan peoples selected the best, progressively improving quality.

Today, we associate tomatoes with Italian cooking but initially Europeans used them as table ornaments, unsafe to eat. The leaves of modern tomatoes retain some toxicity but Dr. Google tells me you'd need to ingest a pound of leaves to get sick -- rabbits have yet to probe the Internet.

Yet, when marveling at your luxurious tomato leaves, prepare yourself for a shock—camouflaged amongst the lime green stems is a scary stowaway—the Tomato Hornworm. This caterpillar-like creature is the length and thickness of an



index finger. Its eyes, stripes and black horn are menacing. Their clever disguise means you may not see them unless you peer closely into the foliage...and once you focus at short range, the hornworms loom enormous. I showed one to a boy who became

so repulsed he wouldn't return to the garden.

They can devour your tomato leaves in a few nights so you will want to remove them...if you can find them. As well as blending in well with the thick green stems, they are mostly night-feeders. I've read that if you use a black light they almost glow...so if you happen to have a black-light flashlight...? Fortunately, they aren't slimy and don't bite—or jab with that black horn, so just pull them off.

Perhaps because they are so scary looking I presumed

they were poisonous. I expected they'd concentrate the toxins in the leaves in the way that Monarch Butterflies do with toxic milkweed, but more. I just read to feed them to chickens. I should have guessed that they were not toxic because if they were, they wouldn't need such good camouflage. An insect this robust is invariably someone's dinner! If you see any white eggs on their green backs you have found the larvae of Bracanoid Wasps. These will eventually hatch and eat the hornworms from the inside.

To know if you've been hosting these green guests, check the plant tops for chewed leaves and tell-tale black poop cubes. While juvenile, they hold an 'ick' factor but in their adult form can be quite beautiful. The sphinx moth—also known as the hummingbird moth because of their size and flight pattern, actively pollinates flowers each evening. After a few weeks on your tomatoes, hornworms will burrow into the ground to hibernate, emerging each spring as these impressive moths. I'm told you can discourage the moths from laying their eggs with companion plants like dill and basil. I have my doubts about companion planting but you could do worse than having ripe tomatoes and fresh basil together.

Don't let the possibility of confronting a few hornworms deter you from planting tomatoes—they are well worth the time invested. Recalling the lyrics of John Denver:

Home grown tomatoes--

Home grown tomatoes

What would life be like without home grown tomatoes

Only two things that money can't buy

That's true love and home grown tomatoes



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