

Year of the Tomato celebrates this varied fruit

The National Garden Bureau has designated 1998 as the Year of the Tomato. The tomato originated in the Andean Mountains of South America but was first domesticated by the Aztecs, who lived 2,000 miles to the north - it was actually called tomatl.

The explorer Cortez found the tomato in an Aztec market in 1520 and took the seeds to Spain. In 1522 it was grown in Naples, Italy but was not eaten as it was assumed to be poisonous.

The colonials brought the tomato back



Let's Get Growing

Marjorie Mason Hogue

to the New World. Thomas Jefferson grew tomatoes in 1781 but they were still grown as ornamentals. Not until 1835 were tomatoes popularly eaten as food.

event then, it was advised to first cook them for three hours.

By 1880, six distinct types of tomato seeds were offered to gardeners. Some of these heritage varieties are still available, such as Brandywine.

In 1949 W. Allee Burpee introduced the first F1 hybrid tomato, Big Boy.

Tomatoes today are classified according to fruit shape, days to maturity and colour. From smallest to largest, tomatoes are described as cherry, plum, pear, standard and beefsteak.

Days to maturity means the number of days from planting outdoors to the first expected ripe fruit. Early tomatoes produce in 55 to 65 days, mid-season in 66 to 80 days while late varieties require more than 80 days.

The colour ranges from creamy white to lime green, yellow, gold, pink, orange and red.

The pink, yellow and orange varieties have a milder flavour but they do not contain less acid as is usually thought.

Plant growth can be defined as

indeterminate, determinate or semi-determinate.

Indeterminate tomatoes continue growing and producing fruit until killed by frost. They are usually staked and their excessive growth pruned off.

Determinate tomatoes produce a bushy, compact plant. They flower, set fruit and ripen in a short time so the main harvest is concentrated in a few weeks.

Semi-determinate plants set and ripen fruit over a longer period of time that a regular determinate type.

Tomato seed should be sown indoors six to 10 weeks before the last frost date (May 24). The seedlings should be transplanted into two-and-a-half inch pots burying the stems to the first set of leaves. Grow them in a sunny window with cool nighttime temperatures (60 degrees F).

In mid May, they should be hardened off outside before planting into the ground or containers.

Today's tomato varieties are resistant to many troublesome diseases, but one physiological

disorder is often a problem. Blossom-end rot begins when fruit is about half-developed during periods of half growth. When soil moisture is alternately high or low, the plant is unable to take up calcium resulting in the rot.

To keep soil moisture even, always put a mulch of two to three inches of straw around the tomato plants.

Unlike the early people, who were sure that tomatoes were poisonous, we know they supply us with vitamins A, C, potassium, calcium and lycopene, which prevents certain types of cancer.

Don't miss Canada Blooms, which runs March 11 to 15 at the South Convention Centre in Toronto - an easy covered walk from Union Station. I shall be speaking at 11 a.m. on Wednesday and Saturday and demonstrating the making of a moss hanging basket at 3:30 p.m. on those same days.

Send questions or comments care of this newspaper. Our address, fax number and e-mail address can be found on page 4.

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