January 29, 2017

Which Tomato Cultivars Are Best for Me?

Garden raised tomatoes, whether red, yellow, pink, large, or small, all sound delicious, so how does a person select among the cultivars to try in his or her garden? Keep in mind that cultivars are selected based on flavor, fruit characteristics, maturity, disease resistance, and growth habit. Tomatoes listed in this article are recommended for Kentucky gardens by the University of Kentucky based on research information.

When canning tomatoes and tomato products regardless of the cultivar, the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends adding bottled lemon juice to jars before processing for food safety purposes. Recent research has shown that some tomato cultivars have insufficient acidity levels. The proper acidity level is needed to safely can tomatoes and prevent food poisoning. Contact Mary Higginbotham, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent in Daviess County, for recipes containing the correct amount of lemon juice to add to increase the acidity and for the proper processing time.

In general, pear- or oblong-shaped tomatoes contain less water and tend to be ‘meatier’ for sauces and pastes. Plum Dandy and Plum Crimson are two examples, which are resistant to
Cherry type and grape tomatoes have fruits that can be eaten in one or two bites. Supersweet 100, Mountain Magic, and Cupid (grape) are disease resistant cultivars.

Popular regular sized fruit, heirloom cultivars for Kentucky are Cherokee Purple and Cour di Bue – Oxheart.

The desired flavor of the tomato depends on your taste. Some cultivars taste sweet and others have more "tomato" flavor. Tasting different cultivars is the only way to determine the best tomato for you.

Fruit maturity ranks as one of my top considerations for cultivar selection. I want tomatoes as early as possible! Fruit maturity ranges from 55 to over 70 days after planting. I like to plant several cultivars with different maturity dates.

Disease resistance is another important consideration for cultivar selection. This is one of the most effective ways for the home gardener to limit losses to destructive tomato diseases or to avoid them. Letters following the name of a cultivar indicate the disease resistance it carries. For example, Roma VF has disease resistance to verticillium (V) and fusarium (F). Each company tends to have its own method of labeling and indicating disease resistance. Look in the catalog or on the website for definitions of the letters.

For our area, look for disease resistance against verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt Race 1, 2, and 3, nematodes, tobacco mosaic virus, and early blight. The three races of fusarium wilt may seem confusing, but Race 3 has some genetic differences from Race 2, and Race 1 has differences compared to the other two. Planting disease resistant cultivars to verticillium wilt,
fusarium wilt, nematodes, and tobacco mosaic virus is the only way to manage these diseases. Good sanitation practices such as destroying old and diseased plant material and crop rotation help to reduce the severity of diseases.

Disease resistance to early blight caused by *Alternaria solani* is only available in a few cultivars, such as Mountain Fresh Plus, Plum Crimson, Plum Dandy, Plum Regal, and Matt’s Wild Cherry. This is one of the common foliar diseases for which more resistant cultivars will hopefully soon be developed.

Two other terms found in catalogs and on websites are determinate and indeterminate. These two terms describe the plant's growth habit. Determinate growth habit means that plant growth slows or stops after a certain number of fruit forms. Mountain Fresh Plus and Carolina Gold are examples. A tomato plant with an indeterminate growth habit continues to grow throughout the season and produce fruit. Big Beef, Better Boy, and Beefsteak are examples.

As you look through catalogs and online, read the descriptions carefully. They should tell about the disease resistance and growth habit. If you are not interested in growing your own tomato plants from seed, you can still use these resources to decide what cultivars to look for among locally grown transplants. Also, the plant tag with the transplant may have additional information about the cultivar.

More information about additional tomato cultivars may be found in *Vegetable Cultivars for Kentucky Gardens–2013* at [http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/id/id133/id133.pdf](http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/id/id133/id133.pdf). Also, for questions about canning tomatoes, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480.
Annette’s tip for the week:

The wet weather this past year made growing tomatoes challenging. Foliar diseases such as early blight and Septoria are two common fungal pathogens. Bacterial spot can be a problem also. Gardeners commonly ask if they can treat the soil for these organisms to prevent the loss of foliage. Unfortunately we cannot. They can be managed by crop rotation and removing diseased material from the area promptly after the plants are finished.

However, when the conditions are right, these foliar diseases can develop quickly. Water on leaves, whether from rain or irrigation, for a period of time helps the disease organism to grow and spread. Spacing plants far enough apart to promote good air circulation to dry the leaves quickly slows the growth and spread of the disease. When watering tomato plants, avoid applying water to the leaves. If the leaves become wet, then make sure to water the plants early enough in the day so that the leaves are dry before nightfall.

If you choose, using fungicides may help improve the management of the foliar diseases. More information about the crop protectant material, either conventional or organic, is available at the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service.

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