

HEIRLOOM TOMATOES...IT'S ALL ABOUT FLAVOR!!!

By Amy LeBlanc, Owner

Whitehill Farm

E. Wilton, ME 04234

207-778-2685

www.whitehillfarm.com

Why grow heirloom tomatoes? Heirlooms represent a slice of history including people's personal memories of "the way it used to be" or "...my grandmother used to grow..." Even though tomatoes come in an incredible array of colors, textures, shapes, and flavor, there is only an ounce of actual genetic diversity among those varieties. But that is enough to start a dialog with customers and provide a jumping off point for marketing.

Heirloom tomatoes have been in the news for years, and with good reason. But after all the conversations about genetic diversity, the history and stories, it all boils down to one word - flavor. The home gardener is growing heirlooms for their flavor. The market customer comes back again and again for the "good old tomato flavor" provided by heirlooms. My seedling customers send me out to find "that tomato my grandmother grew" or "the perfect sandwich tomato". My personal search has been for the "perfect, no nonsense paste tomato" that tastes so good we can eat it fresh as well as consign it to the sauce pot!

Sometimes the subject of heirlooms and poor disease resistance comes up. I have to say that, in my experience, most heirlooms can be grown well and will be disease free if good conditions are provided. Ample spacing to provide plenty of air drainage, mulch to prevent splash from the soil, steady moisture, appropriate support, and minimal pruning will all contribute to a good harvest. Other folks maintain that heirlooms may bear fewer fruits than hybrids. In some cases this IS true, but in my experience well grown plants will bear well as a general rule. And it IS true that some heirloom tomatoes will crack on the shoulders. One of the factors that makes the heirloom tomato so appreciated is the tenderness of the skin. And it is that tenderness that makes many heirlooms vulnerable to cracking. The "secret" to limiting cracking is providing even moisture. Since the skins lose a lot of their elasticity as they approach maturity, a heavy rain (or drip irrigation left on too long) will swell the fruits and cause cracking. With heavy rain in the forecast it is sometimes wise to pick ripe and almost ripe fruits to protect them!

Market growers sometimes experience the "it looks funny" reaction to some heirlooms, but a tasting plate will take care of doubters! From a practical standpoint, a great market display should have a good mix of hybrids, standards, and heirlooms. There will always be the customer who can't possibly eat a tomato that isn't round and red! But that's where the tasting plate comes in - even dyed-in-the-wool red tomato folks can be challenged to try something new! In addition to direct market sales, the connection to chefs and fine restaurants provides another valuable outlet for an unusual and beautiful crop.

Trials of heirloom tomatoes can be a real adventure. I try to plan at least three years for a realistic trial, as the results I need are complex. I need to know if the variety will produce at all in my niche of New England. I need to know how the variety will produce in the widely varying growing seasons in New England. I need to know the growth habits of the plant. It is amazing what differences of opinion there are when describing “healthy”, “sprawling”, “compact”, or “vining”

plants! I also need to know if the variety is sensitive to particular locations (mini-climates) on my property. I need to know when I can expect the first ripe fruits. I need to satisfy the question of whether this variety is actually unique. And last but not least, I need to know if it tastes good!

So my trials include several widely spaced plantings of at least 3-4 plants each as well as side-by-side plantings with suspiciously similar varieties. The true test comes in the second and third years when I grow out seedlings from saved seed. I carefully select fruit that meets the description and save seed to see if the variety will breed true.

As complicated as trialing might seem, it is still very subjective! The bottom line is still the flavor! I market my trials at farmer’s market right next to the tried and true favorites. The customers are very good at letting me know which ones they like!

Amy LeBlanc, owner of Whitehill Farm, E. Wilton, ME will be presenting a seminar on heirloom tomatoes Friday, May 16th. Please see the All Things Growing Garden Seminar Schedule in this publication.