

What Happened to Tomato Flavor?

Florida's climate is ideal for growing a wide range of crops. Some of our major commercial crops include citrus, sugarcane, peppers, cotton, peanuts, watermelons, beans, potatoes and tomatoes. The tomato is not only the most important commercial vegetable grown in Florida, but it is also the most popular vegetable grown in home gardens.

The tomato is second only to the potato as the most produced vegetable in the U.S. Recently, there has been an increase in imported winter and spring tomatoes from Mexico. Most tomatoes are grown in the field, but greenhouse production is on the rise. The U.S. imports greenhouse tomatoes from Holland, Spain, Israel and Canada.

The pressure is on commercial growers to be able to ship needed produce to keep up with the demand and stay competitive in expanding markets. As consumers, we don't want find bruised and off color tomatoes on the grocer's shelves. But if growers shipped 'red-ripe' tomatoes, they wouldn't survive the ordeal of being shipped and shelved for customers.

To meet the needs of growers and get their crops to distant markets, researchers have crossed and tested many tomato varieties. New varieties ship much better and resist bruising, and they continue to ripen well when picked at a point before the 'red-ripe' stage. They stand up to the melting Florida heat and show resistance to many pests, lessening the amount of pesticide use.

Somewhere in this research, many agree that a certain tomato flavor has been lost, or bred out. The same thing happened with roses. I naturally sniff a rose because I expect a wonderful fragrance. But in an effort to get longer stems, larger blossoms, more sensational colors or longer vase life, rose breeders have lost the 'scent' in newer roses.

To rediscover that lost tomato flavor, many gardeners are growing heirloom tomatoes which are non-hybrid varieties. To be an heirloom variety, a tomato must meet three criteria. First, it must grow from seed. It also must have a known history and have been grown in cultivation for more than 50 years.

There are drawbacks to growing heirlooms, however. The fruits aren't very tough, they spoil quickly, and they bruise easily. Because they aren't hybrids bred for resistances, they easily succumb to our heat, diseases and pests. Determined gardeners do have an option of grafting an heirloom plant shoot (scion) onto the root (rootstock) of a resistant tomato variety. Both heirloom and suggested rootstock varieties can be obtained from commercial seed companies.

Responding to the needs of Florida's consumers and industries is a vital role of research at the University of Florida/IFAS. The Tasti-Lee Tomato is a newly introduced UF variety which has successfully restored some of the 'old-fashioned' flavor. They are now available in many grocery stores. The UF tomato breeding program is working hard to maintain growers' competitiveness and ability to supply a good product to Florida and the nation. For more research-based information on growing tomatoes in Florida's climate and soil, go to <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/vh028> or call the Master Gardeners at 752-5384. *(Published 2-3-13)*