

THE

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Johnny's
Selected Seeds



Growing heirloom tomatoes

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I began growing heirloom tomatoes in 1982 with my then wife Anne B. Banks. We had moved to Mendocino, California, a wet and rainy place where the winter and spring rain subsides and it becomes hot and dry through the summer. We began looking for an early ripening tomato that would fruit and ripen under hostile coastal conditions. Ann's aunt from Eugene, Oregon, sent us an eastern European heirloom called "Stupice," which had worked well for her. Although this tomato was relatively small, it tasted great and yielded well the entire season.

I grew up in the Garden State, New Jersey, eating wonderful native grown tomatoes. The "Stupice" tomatoes we grew that season were as great tasting as the fabled Jersey tomatoes I remembered. The following year we moved to Hillsdale, New York and brought the "Stupice" seed with us but it did not perform well in Hillsdale. Fortunately, we tried another old-timer, "Brandywine," that season. "Brandywine" looked terrible and yielded poorly but more than compensated for these faults with the most gorgeous, meaty texture and flavor that Anne and I had ever experienced. From 1984 on I have grown a number of hybrid tomato varieties, but still I have remained hooked on heirlooms.

Well, it's the year 2001, and a lot has changed since those early years. For instance, instead of keeping the heirlooms for ourselves, and selling just the hybrids, we now bring to market as many tons per season of "Eva Purple Ball" (heirloom) as we do of Johnny's 361". This did not happen overnight. I began to successfully market heirlooms in 1994 after years of trying. Before 1994, chefs were generally not interested in heirloom tomatoes, no matter how passionately a grower touted their unique qualities. The standard then (as now) was that tomatoes hold up for more than 24 hours, a real problem for many of the varieties that I was growing. The turning point was a chance meeting with a Mr. Hollander, an heirloom seed saver who needed land to grow out the 100+ varieties of heirloom tomato seeds he had collected through the years. Many of the seeds were not only from New England and the Northeast, but were collected right here in Berkshire County, MA, where I have lived since 1992. As he grew out and trialed the varieties, we began to search for those tomatoes that not only had great flavor but

also other important market-orientated qualities such as shapeliness and shelf life. Promising varieties were sold to my customers, who were slow to understand the differences between open pollinated varieties vs. hybrids. Although many of the chefs at this point (1994-97) were not concerned with the heritage of the tomatoes, they did appreciate a great tomato when it came their way.

Now, over the past two years, chefs not only order heirloom tomatoes by name but also have designed dishes around specific varieties. The genetic engineering controversy has done a world of good not only for the chef's understanding of open pollinated breeding but also for the knowledge of the general consumer. No matter how well a tomato is genetically engineered or manipulated through hybridization, there is still a tremendous appeal in the real flavor of open pollinated tomatoes that are ancestrally related to their origin.

This past season, we planted five 15 ft. x 160 ft. greenhouses to equal plantings of mixed heirloom and hybrid varieties. All the tomatoes planted were of a vigorous determinate nature and supported by basket weave support. No indeterminate greenhouse adapted varieties were used. Using determinates in 7ft. high hoop houses, cuts out the need for tall trellising throughout the growing season. Labor is minimized and ripening is concentrated within peak marketing months (for us, July -early September). All tomatoes were on drip irrigation under black plastic in a rich organic soil and fed throughout the season with fish and kelp. The fruit of all the varieties was packed and delivered in the same standard 20-25 lb. boxes, with variety selection the key to adequate shelf life. Over the last fruiting month of this past growing season, the heirloom varieties maintained

and gained impeccable flavor while the hybrids generally became weaker in flavor. This was confirmed by the mention of a number of people beside myself. In this modern moment of constant technological "improvement," we resoundingly have not improved on the flavor of tomatoes. Therefore, rejoice and grow Heirlooms!

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Product Information:

HEIRLOOM TOMATOES

756 MOSKVICH: 60 days.
One of the most appealing extra-early tomatoes. Deep red, and cold tolerant.
Organically grown seeds.

711 BRANDYWINE: 78 days.
The best-tasting tomato. Taste is very rich, loud, and distinctively spicy.

714 YELLOW BRANDYWINE: 78 days.
An orange old-timer with rich taste.

See our complete list of heirloom tomatoes on page 71 in our 2001 commercial Catalog.

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