

Saving Heirloom Tomato Seeds

“High-tech tomatoes. Mysterious milk. Supersquash. Are we supposed to eat this stuff?
Or is it going to eat us?”

Anita Manning

I spent the past couple weekends processing many vegetables from my garden. I canned numerous pints of green beans, spaghetti sauce, and salsa; froze eggplant (my dehydrating experiment failed—twice); prepped cabbage to ferment for sauerkraut; and even made some zucchini bread. My salsa recipe is one of the first recipes my mother-in-law shared with me years ago when I first started canning. I’ve been using the same recipe ever since then. One of the things that make this salsa recipe so amazing is that it’s best when you use a variety of different tomatoes and that’s exactly what I had. I have a few hybrids, but most of my tomatoes are heirloom varieties. One of the main reasons to plant heirloom tomatoes is that they tend to have amazing flavors. It’s easy to enjoy those wonderful flavors from your heirloom tomatoes every year if you take the time to save their seeds.

Saving tomatoes seeds is not difficult but there are some things you should keep in mind. You want to first make sure your tomatoes are open-pollinated or heirloom varieties. Only heirloom varieties will be true from seeds. Hybrid tomatoes are those whose parent plants have been crossed to create a hybrid variety.

Once you’ve determined that your tomato is an heirloom, save the seeds from the best tomato on the plant. ‘Best’ can be whatever you determine is the characteristic you are trying to get save – ie. biggest, tastiest, or even most colorful. No matter what attribute you are trying to save, select from the healthiest plant. Chose a tomato that is in it’s prime, not over- or under-ripe, diseased, misshapen, etc. If possible, save seeds from several healthy plants from the same variety.

The next step is fermenting the seeds. Scope out the seeds into a small container and then add a quarter to a half cup of water. Set this container aside out of the sun for three to five days. It will most likely get a moldy scum on top of the container but that’s okay. Carefully remove the scum, add more water, and stir. The good seeds will sink to the bottom. Carefully pour off the water, floating seeds, and any bits of pulp. Repeat this process until you have “clean” seeds. Drain the seeds and place them on a screen or paper plate to dry. I’ve also let them dry on a paper towel but it’s a little more difficult to separate the seeds from the paper towel. If that happens, you can always plant the seed with the paper towel still attached. Always remember to label your varieties unless you like mystery plants.

Once your seeds are completely dry, store them in an airtight container. Old prescription bottles work well. Tomato seeds can remain viable for years, even at room temperature. For extra protection, you can store them in the refrigerator or freezer. If you do store them in either of these locations, allow them to come to room temperature before opening the container so you don’t get moisture from condensation. If you have extra silica packets, you can use them as well.

Don’t worry if you’re unsuccessfully at saving your seeds. You can also get heirloom tomatoes at the Sauk County Master Gardeners Association’s annual tomato plant sale next spring. The sale is typically held one of the last weekends in May. Then, at the end of the summer, the SCMGA holds a tomato tasting event to select the best tasting tomatoes. This year the winners were (1) Honeycomb, (2) Chocolate Cherry, and (3) Wapsipinicon Peach. Those are the ones I’ll be looking for next spring. This fall, try saving some of your favorite heirloom varieties – it will give you a great sense of accomplishment and help ensure continued tomato diversity.

This week’s article is written by Jeannie Manis, a Wisconsin Certified Sauk County Master Gardener Volunteer. If you have any gardening questions, please contact the Extension Sauk County by emailing to trripp@wisc.edu or calling the University of Wisconsin Madison Division of Extension Sauk County office at 608-355-3250.