



IN THE RED . . .

Growing Her Own Tomatoes Hasn't Turned Out to Be the Cost Saver She Thought It Might Be!

By Nissa Simon

Obsessions often begin harmlessly enough. Mine started a couple of years ago, when I was leafing through a garden catalogue on one of those frigid January days that makes looking forward to spring the only way to get through winter. I made an offhand comment to my husband that a grow light might allow us to produce large, bushy plants from seed, thus saving the expense of buying tomatoes in gallon containers from the garden center. Then I flipped to the next page and forgot about it. He didn't. On Valentine's Day, I found a 5-foot-long package, tied with a red bow, sitting in the front hall: my grow light. (Cost: \$125+. *It would have been churlish to ask the exact amount.*)

We are uncompromising when it comes to tomatoes. We scorn those pale imitations that stock the supermarket shelves from November through June. If something prevents us from growing our own, we buy tomatoes at local farm stands or depend on

the kindness of neighbors. We love heirloom tomatoes, those wonderful, juicy varieties that have retained the same shape and flavor decade after decade. For years, delighted diners have spit the seeds of particularly tasty specimens into napkins and saved them until planting time the following spring, thus enabling the tomatoes to make their way down the generations unchanged.

It was almost warm enough to put them into the garden—but there was a threat of frost, so we bought 16 teepees to keep the plants cozy. (Price: \$11 each. My, this is adding up!)

Heirloom tomato seeds have traveled across the country in covered wagons as well as station wagons and across oceans on sailing ships and airplanes. They range in color

from yellow to orange to red to purple to green. Some are striped, some are streaked. Their flavors have been described as "tangy-sweet," "sharp," "full-bodied," "smoky" and "spicy." No hybridizing these beauties so they lose their personalities and develop into uniform, hard globes marching in lock step toward a tasteless future!

My husband remembers his grandfather

slicing a Brandywine tomato to use on a sandwich. They were so large one slice covered a piece of bread. When we decided to start our own plants last year, we bought a pack of Brandywine seeds. A neighbor had given me a wonderful, fuzzy, yellow tomato with a pink blush that she bought at a farmer's market in Seattle. It looked and felt like a peach, but tasted like a sweet tomato. Indeed, it was called "Peach" and has been grown since the 19th Century. I saved the seeds. Another neighbor gave me seeds of a grape tomato that struck me as the sweetest I'd eaten.

So there I was, with my new grow light, ready not only to save money but also to grow tomatoes with spectacular taste.

The first step was to order three seed-starting kits (\$10 each) and germinating mix (\$5.50). Hmm. This was becoming a bit expensive. I filled the growing cells with mix and nestled two seeds into each. I waited. Suddenly, there they were! Threadlike stems pushing their way toward the light. When they were large enough, I transplanted them into peat pots. (*Oh, I've forgotten how much they cost. Not much, though.*) Then it was almost warm enough to put them into the garden—but there was a threat of frost, so we bought 16 teepees to fill with water to keep the plants cozy. (Price: \$11 each. *My, this is adding up!*) We also needed tomato food and plastic mulch. (*No, I can't remember what all that cost. Some, not a lot.*)



The author's prize-winning Peach tomatoes, above. Order your own garden 'heirlooms' at:

- www.southernexposure.com
- www.cooksgarden.com
- www.shepherdseeds.com
- www.heirloomseeds.com
- www.tomatobob.com

Everything worked just as it should. We had wonderful salads, great sandwiches and superb salsa. The peach tomatoes were wondrous to behold. And so day followed beautiful summer day into August when, unbeknownst to me, my husband entered the peach tomatoes in my name into the heirloom tomato competition at the local agricultural fair. When we went to the fair one evening, he steered me toward the vegetable table. And there they were: six peach tomatoes, sitting on a plate, resplendent in their velvety skin and blushing pink with pride—over the first-prize blue ribbon they'd just won! The attached envelope held the prize money: \$2 in cash.

It was at that moment that I decided you can't attach a price tag to everything. This year I started searching through the heirloom tomato catalogues early to round out my collection of saved seeds. We have homegrown plants of red and pink Brandywine, peach, yellow pear, grape and orange tomatoes. We also have some Dona tomatoes, a French gourmet variety. I don't think it's an heirloom, but if it lives up to its promise, my grandchildren will plant its descendents, when they grow up and have gardens of their own. I'm sure they'll consider them heirlooms, as they tuck the plants tenderly into the ground when all danger of frost has passed (or sooner, if they buy tomato teepees). □

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