



It's Time to Plant the Queen of Any Garden – the Tomato

by Natalia Budilo

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With dozens of varieties available in equally as many colors and flavor subtleties, it becomes a creative endeavor to put together a platter or beautiful bowl of tomatoes. Anyone who grows tomatoes can tell you there is absolutely nothing as delicious as when you select that perfect tomato from your garden – warmed by the sun, cut it into thick slices to put between two slices of bread spread evenly with mayonnaise. Have you ever chopped up a perfect avocado, sprinkled it with your favorite garlic salt after spreading it onto wheat bread? It isn't complete without the addition of tomato slices.

Tomatoes can be roasted, toasted, jammed and jarred. They can be frozen, dehydrated and rehydrated in flavored oils and used in more ways than there are tomato varieties! If I were on a deserted island, I would choose tomatoes to be that one food to have with me.

I have selected 5 varieties of seed to begin my tomato project this year. I eat tomatoes daily, make homemade ketchup, and dehydrate tomatoes for winter use or for a beautiful charcuterie cheese tray topping. I love to make homemade tomato sauces and prepare pizza and spaghetti sauce to last through next year's harvest, at the very least. My favorite meaty tomato is of course the Roma variety. It grows quickly, is a hearty plant and has less of the gel inside it than most other varieties. It is perfect for sauces.

I am planting the Heirloom variety of Roma this year. I have also selected an heirloom Italian seed, Costoluto Genovese tomato and will be able to report on it next year. I have a Tumbler Hybrid Container tomato, heirloom Green Zebra (which will add color and interest to my platters) and last but not least, Beefmaster F-1 – the perfect tomato-sandwich tomato. I need to select the perfect cherry tomato as yet but am leaning to a Century 100 – the favorite of my grandson, Liam, who likes to pop them into his mouth after picking them off of the vine himself and dipping into rinse water. He's a chip off of his Baka.

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Enjoy an easy recipe for dried tomatoes provided for your experimentation.

Dehydrated Tomatoes

The variety you select doesn't really matter. You may be looking at the final result in terms of size and color. I don't waste any tomato and dehydration is a perfect preservative method.

Wash tomatoes and dry them. Slice ¼" thick and lay them across the tray. Set them densely as they will shrink considerably. Set the temperature of the dehydrator at 135°F.

I use an electric dehydrator with the heat source and fan on the bottom. I rotate the stackable trays every 2-4 hours, assuring even distribution of temperature and air circulation. Dehydrating times vary with the amount of humidity in the air.

Completion is when the tomatoes are crisp-dry, or at the very earliest, leathery without moisture. I prefer the crisp. I pack them in sterilized mason jars for storage and drop in an oxygen packet or two, depending on the size of the jar. The oxygen pack helps to contain any moisture that might be present, protecting the tomatoes from mold growth.

Rehydrate in water, oil and/or vinegar. This is where your creativity comes into play. These are an excellent addition to sandwiches, salads, potatoes, pizza, and over cream cheese. Enjoy!

If you'd like to learn more about how to grow and preserve tomatoes, come to the *Tomatoes from Seed to Table* class on Saturday, March 24 at the Government Center Hearing Room, Building C, 2850 Fairlane Court in Placerville from 9:00-Noon. UCCE Master Gardeners and Master Food Preservers will share successful growing tips and ways to preserve your tomato harvest.

UCCE Master Food Preserver and Master Gardener volunteers are available to answer home food preservation and gardening questions; leave a message on our helplines. Call the Master Gardeners at (530) 621-5512; call the Master Food Preservers at (530) 621-5506. For more information about our public education classes and activities, sign up for our e-Newsletters or to make a donation, go to the UCCE Central Sierra website at <http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/>. You can also find both programs on Facebook.