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## FROM GOOD LAND

BY SCOTT CHASKEY



### THE WOLF'S PEACH

*Staking tomatoes and other forms of insanity.*



AMAGANSETT—It is with a touch of trepidation that I assume the responsibility to speak of the apple of paradise. Just a few years ago, a fellow farmer and myself, facing yet another year filled with hours and hours of nightshade duties, debated whether our Quail Hill Farm members would notice if we accidentally forgot to plant the tomatoes. In short, they would. Although we grow more than 50 crops (over 225 varieties), the favorites remain: lettuce, potatoes, onions, greens, tomatoes. Our reluctance on one particular year does not reflect distaste, only an honest hesitation to deal with the demands of thousands of nightshades also known as the “love apple.” Given good soil, sun, and some water, it is easy enough to grow tomatoes; it is not easy to grow them well.

Determined to improve our reputation, and respectful of the love apple’s friendship with garlic and basil, we continue to experiment

with *Lycopersicon* (“wolf’s peach”) *esulentum*. The tomato is a member of the Solanaceae family, which also includes potatoes, peppers, eggplant, and tobacco. Native to South America, tomatoes probably originated in the coastal highlands of Peru and Ecuador. The wild form is also found in Mexico and Central America; ancient drawings tell us that Peruvian Indians cultivated the tomato as early as the fifth century B.C. The Spanish encountered this plant in Mexico, sometime after 1519, and then carried seed to the Caribbean and the Philippines. Matthioli, an Italian herbalist, first mentions the “mala aurea” (golden apple) in 1544. The first report of the tomato in North America was made by William Salmon, after 1680, and it may have arrived via the Caribbean. This new fruit was not an overnight success. Some complained of the odor of the plant, others feared the poisonous glycoalkaloids found in the leaves of other nightshades, and still others preferred to use this vine plant as an ornamental. Tomatoes were also grown for medicinal purposes; they are a good source of vitamin C and potassium. The love apple is also a major source of lycopene, a substance similar to beta-carotene, thus effective as an antioxidant.

At present, the annual United States tomato crop is valued at over

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\$1 billion; 80 percent of this crop is harvested mechanically for processing. Americans consume over 12 million tons of tomatoes each year. Most commercial varieties sold are hybrids, and there are a great many of these, but note the number of open pollinated varieties distributed by various seed saving groups. The Seed Savers Exchange yearbook contains about 125 pages of tomatoes, over three thousand varieties; the legendary Ben Quisenberry tested thousands on his own. Carolyn J. Male, who publishes a newsletter devoted entirely to heirloom tomatoes, keeps a database that lists ten thousand USDA registered varieties. Dr. Carolyn, a beautiful pale yellow cherry tomato—which produces fruit throughout the entire season and was named for this lover of the love apple—was a new favorite at the farm this year.

Before the decision is made to order seeds, it is helpful to consider the labor required by determinate and indeterminate plants. Indeterminates are viney—they can grow to seven or eight feet. Determinates are bush shaped, so they will require less staking, or none, depending on your need to establish order. We have tried most staking methods known to man, accompanied by vile language and disaster, but in the end we have settled on three basic techniques. We have patented a rather hilarious procedure, needing several farmhands and a few monkeys, once the peas elsewhere in the garden are exhausted. We cut away the pea vines, place a person at each stake, and walk the snaking trellis over to the tomato patch, to be used once again, this time as support for the very viney cherry tomatoes. Cherries are often the first to ripen, and the last to be picked, and as such are indispensable in the garden. Perhaps unfairly, Sungold, a cherry, tends to win our Tomato Tasting year after year. My favorite is Matt's Wild Cherry, a little sweet red one that often ripens an entire cluster at once. The tiny White Currant is in fact too sweet for some palates, though children are drawn to its candy quality.

Another staking technique, claimed by multiple states (the New Jersey weave, the Florida weave, the Texas weave), remains the

method of choice, especially if you are providing for many harvesters. Stakes, one to two inches thick, are pounded in along the row, at intervals of about ten feet, two to three plants between each stake. Then, using twine or baling string, the gardener weaves in and out of the stakes and plants, up and back along the row. As the plants mature, another weave is added, before the vines leap or fall to the

ground. Depending on the commitment of the weaver, the strength of the twine, the relative humidity, and the willingness of the tomato plant, the results of this substantial effort tend to vary widely, to say the least. Ultimately, this method allows for increased air circulation, and gives the fruit a place to ripen just a little nearer to the sun.

Our third technique is no technique at all—lacking time, to let them fall. We have, in the past, when good, clean straw was available, packed a thick mulch under the plants, after cultivating once or twice. This also serves to prevent splash-back—which in gardener's lingo simply describes the habit of hard rain bouncing back after hitting the hard surface of summer soil. The leaves of tomato plants are sensitive and highly susceptible to fungus and disease. Tomatoes prefer to receive water at the plant base, not on the leaves. We are told by literature and horticulturists to avoid handling tomato plants when they are wet, as Sarah S., one-time Quail Hill worker and tomato lover, reminded me, repeatedly. On a wet, wet summer I was barred from the tomato patch.

Reportedly, Ben Q.'s favorite was Brandywine, a pink tomato of good size, unusual shape, and superb taste. We have grown this indeterminate variety, which can take ninety days to ripen, for ten years at Quail Hill, and the performance varies, according to the weather. Given the number of choices, one of the thrills of tomato growing is selection; the names are fascinating, as are the tales. Radiator Charlie's Mortgage Lifter, another plant with sizable fruit, has found a secure home in our tomato patch. M. C. Byles, or Radiator Charlie,





who owned a repair shop at the foot of a steep hill, and had no formal education, created this tomato by crossbreeding the four largest fruits he could find. He planted one variety in the center of a circle, and with a baby's ear syringe he crossed that plant with pollen from the others; the following year he planted the finest seedling in the center, and selected again. After six years he had a stable variety, large-fruited and full of taste, and he began selling his delicious tomatoes, one dollar per plant (during the 1940s). In six years' time Radiator Charlie had paid off the mortgage on his home!

We have learned to take our time with tomatoes, in the spring. The anxious horticulturist, eager to get the seeding under way, will find herself, come May, with plants crisscrossing to the ceiling of the greenhouse or window bay. We prefer to seed later, say in the beginning of April, so that when the day arrives for setting out in the field, our nightshades are small, but strong and healthy. Each year we trial some new varieties, following advice from those who fancy the love apple. Our annual Tomato Tasting, traditionally held at the start of September, with a rating scale ranging from "The Best" to "Yuk," also serves as an ordering sheet for the following year. In addition to the very popular cherries, several varieties consistently score top grades, and the tasters are amazed by the variations in size, color, and texture. Green Zebra is sweet, pretty, and prolific; Garden Peach is a beautiful yellow with rose color, and yes, the skin is fuzzy. The black tomatoes (mahogany, really) vary each year, though we always plant Cherokee Purple, Paul Robeson (the Russians loved the singer, and they love black tomatoes), and Black Plum—wonderful for drying or sauce. There is a place in every garden for grand, ugly fruits, so we continue to plant Striped German, Persimmon, and Omar's Lebanese. Moskvich ripens early, and rarely cracks, and each year we harvest an abundance of Arkansas Traveler, Rutgers, and the orange Valencia. Throughout this season we feasted in the field on Jaune Flammée and Juliet. And we harvested thousands of pounds of Amish Paste, Red Agate, Aunt Mary's, and Gilbertie, to be made into sauce in the kitchens of the Ross School, to accompany a school year of pasta.

My older son has recently acquired a taste for fresh tomatoes, after 18 years of hesitation. My younger children, connoisseurs of sauce, still refuse to taste the fruit picked from the vine. I, myself, a slow, reluctant student of tomato culture, now reassure the members of our farm that, yes, we will seed more of them, and harvest more of them, and we will search for the sweetest of the heirlooms. When the rains are sparse, I turn to the clouds to persuade them to part, at least once a week. If the clouds open up day after day, I remind the heavens that tomatoes found their natural home in Italy—they prefer the sun. I recall these words, with respect for the wolf's peach, the love apple, the apple of paradise: "Anyone would be a fool to take the sun lightly...." □

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## WHEN GARDENERS COOK

Like a seed that lays dormant in the soil for many years before germinating, Quail Hill Farm recently released a cookbook of recipes pulled together from its members' kitchens. Many previous efforts to assemble such a book fizzled, and several members characterized the completion as "a small miracle." Inspired by members who simply wanted to know what to do with unfamiliar or uncommon vegetables, the cookbook includes recipes gathered by email, fax, post, and word-of-mouth over the farm's 15-year history. Organized by crop, the book features some unsung garden heroes: there are 13 cabbage recipes. It also mingles standard Americana cookery with cuisines from India, China, and Latin America. Check out Sweet-Hot Oriental Broccoli Rabe, Indian Cabbage, and Marion's Mistake Potato Pancakes. Peppered with photographs from the farm, the book also recounts the farm's history and offers a seasonal harvest guide. It sells for \$25 at Canio's in Sag Harbor, and will also be available at Quail Hill and from the Peconic Land Trust. (A couple of recipes from the book follow.)

### OVEN DRIED TOMATOES

Oven dried tomatoes can be pureed to make an incredibly rich sauce. Added, as is, to any dish, they pack a wallop of tomato flavor. They also freeze beautifully. Core and slice tomatoes into 1/2 inch horizontal slices. Spread out on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper or coated with olive oil. Sprinkle the tomato slices with salt and pepper, chopped garlic (optional) and a drizzle of olive oil. Bake at 300 degrees until most of the liquid is evaporated and the tomatoes are leathery, but not crisp, about 2 hours. Cool and use on garlic bread (don't forget to add basil), pizza, pasta, etc. The dried tomatoes will keep in the fridge for about a week and in the freezer in ziplock bags for about a year.

### NO COOK TOMATO-ZUCCHINI SAUCE

Barbara DiLorenzo suggests this delicious sauce for pasta when time is running short. Place in a large bowl: 2 golden zucchini sliced very thin, 2 large tomatoes diced, 1 clove of minced garlic, 1 tbsp. large capers rinsed and roughly chopped, 1/2 cup black olives pitted and chopped, 1/2 cup of your best olive oil, 1/2 cup lemon juice, 1/2 cup roughly cut basil or other herbs of your choice, 1 tsp. red pepper flakes, and salt to taste. Mix and let stand for half an hour. Prepare penne and toss with sauce. This is a great dish for the buffet table.

