IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
Extension and Outreach

CLIPPINGS a weekly column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

Week of July 1, 2019
For Immediate Release

Heirloom Tomatoes

Katelyn Brinkerhoff, Horticulture Educator

Heirloom tomatoes are the hit of the summer. There are a variety of colors, shapes, and flavors of heirlooms that many like to enjoy. However, how do heirloom tomatoes get their name?

Heirloom tomatoes are a vintage style tomato that have been passed down from generation to generation. Similar to a family heirloom that has been passed down, but instead of a ring or a piano, it's seeds of a delicious tomato. Some varieties are 50-100 years old, but some may be even older than that! All heirlooms are open-pollinated and usually breed true-to-type. Meaning seeds of heirloom tomatoes can be saved year to year to stay in production.

Heirlooms were often selected for flavor potential and eating quality. Over time, vegetable breeding emphasized hybrid varieties bred for uniformity in size, shape and ripening, as well as for durability in shipping. That being said, heirloom tomatoes maybe aren't the most pretty looking tomato on the market in comparison to tomato hybrids you might find in the store, but they have a lot of character. Heirlooms come in a variety of shapes and sizes. I've seen some that have been the size of my head with lumps and bumps of flavor. They are incredibly interesting to see and taste.

Heirloom tomatoes will start popping up in stores and farmers markets in August and September. Depending on the variety, the tomatoes could be indeterminate or determinate. Indeterminate and determinate has to do with the tomato's growth habit.

According to Extension Horticulturist, Richard Juron, "Determinate tomatoes are small, compact plants. They grow to a certain height, stop, and then flower and set all their fruit within a short period of time. The harvest period for determinate tomatoes is approximately four to six weeks. Indeterminate tomatoes continue to grow, flower, and set fruit until killed by the first frost in fall. Accordingly, the harvest from indeterminate cultivars often extends over a two- to three-month period. Yields are generally heavier than determinate types but are usually later to mature. Indeterminate tomatoes are large, sprawling plants that perform best when grown in wire cages or trained on stakes."

Trying new varieties of heirlooms can be something fun to do this summer! Visit a local farmers market in your area to visit with producers to learn more about the varieties they have picked to grow. They may be able to speak to the flavor and texture of the tomatoes they are selling. Don't be afraid of a tomato with a little character; it might just be your new favorite! To find a farmers market near you visit: https://www.idalsdata.org/fmnp/index.cfm?fuseaction=main.formFarmersMarketDirectory.

Katelyn Brinkerhoff, Horticulture Educator
Iowa State University Extension and Outreach
712-276-2157 or kbrink@iastate.edu