



Notes From the Pea Patch

Foxtail Community Farm

Season 6, Week 8

July 25, 2011

Farmer's Notebook

Tomatoes may well be the foundation of the local food movement. There simply is no comparison between a fresh field-grown, vine-ripened tomato and a supermarket variety. This year's crop is enjoying the hot, dry weather and it should be a good harvest on par with last year's bounty.

Although commonly associated with Italian cooking, tomatoes are native to the Americas. They were cultivated by the Aztecs and Incas as far back as 700 A.D., and were introduced to Europe in the 1500s. These first wild tomatoes were cherry-sized husk tomatoes (similar to tomatillos). From these humble beginnings, tomatoes have exploded into a rainbow of purples, oranges, reds, yellows and greens, ranging in size from tiny cherries to 2+ pound beefsteaks.

We grow more varieties of tomatoes than any other crop, 14 this year (see reverse), including many heirloom varieties. The term "heirloom" refers to old-fashioned varieties chosen by growers for their unique qualities and preserved from generation to generation through open pollination and seed saving. In contrast, "hybrid" varieties are produced by crossing two strains selected through inbreeding for specific traits; while the offspring of this cross has the desired blend of traits (for example, color and size), the seeds saved from that offspring will not produce the same traits.

We start our tomatoes in the greenhouse in April and transplant to the fields in May. We then stake, trellis and mulch with hay. These methods help prevent early and late blight, the most damaging problems affecting tomatoes. Other problems commonly affecting tomatoes include blossom end rot, caused by calcium deficiency, and tomato hornworm, a scary-looking giant caterpillar with a large spike on its end.

Some cracking and scabbing is typical on heirloom tomatoes, and does not generally affect taste. Trim away stem and any blemishes. Tomatoes should be stored at room temperature - refrigeration ruins their taste and texture.

This Week's Harvest

Beets - the naturally sweet, earthy flavor of beets makes them a perennial CSA favorite. Remove leaves and store separately in a bag in fridge for 1-2 days; store roots in fridge for up to 3 weeks. We repeatedly hear from members who've been converted to beets through the CSA, so please try them!!

Cucumbers (*large shares*) - our first planting of cucumbers did not do well, but we have a second planting coming on in a few weeks that looks better. Cucumbers will keep about a week in the crisper.

Dill - a familiar and versatile summer herb that food writer Deborah Madison describes as having a "sunny perfume". Dill is essential for pickling and a wonderful complement to beets, carrots or potatoes.

Eggplant (*limited shares*) - the first of the season is a long, thin, oriental variety. Store for 4-5 days in fridge. Remove stems. Good in stir fries.

Tomatillos (*large shares*) - a new crop for Foxtail this year, tomatillos are a native Mexican fruit related to tomatoes. They have a unique tart, herbal flavor that is the essential ingredient in *salsa verde*. They are ready to harvest (and eat) when the papery husks are dried but the fruit is still firm and green. Typically cooked, but can be diced raw. Store in a paper bag in fridge for several weeks. Remove husks before cooking.

Also...

Bunching Onions ~ Cabbage (*large shares*)

Green Beans ~ Lettuce ~ Tomatoes ~

Okra (*rotating shares*) ~ **Green Peppers** ~

Summer Squash (*Limited shares*)

No fruit shares this week - more next week!

Coming Attractions

- Broccoli
- Basil
- Plums (Fruit Shares)



Recipe of the Week: Dilly Beet Salad

An easy preparation that pairs beets with dill in a slightly sweet vinaigrette. This basic recipe highlights beets alone, but would be quite good with chopped onion, tomato and lightly steamed green beans tossed in as well.

- 1 bunch beets, trimmed (keep leaves for another use)
- ½ cup white vinegar
- 2-4 tbs sugar
- 1 tbs fresh chopped dill
- pinch of dried cloves
- pinch of dried allspice

Put beets in a large pot covered with salted water. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce heat and steam until fork-tender, about 20-30 minutes. Drain and let cool, then remove skins and cut into cubes or thick slices.

Whisk sugar into vinegar until dissolved. Toss with beets. Season with dill, cloves and allspice to taste.



Another Recipe: Salsa Verde

I love Mexican salsa verde so much that I have been known to cry upon taking a first bite. This recipe makes about 1 cup, and can be multiplied for larger quantities. Roasting the tomatillos is considered essential by many, though you can also simmer them if you're in a hurry.

- 4-6 medium sized tomatillos
- 1 small onion, chopped
- ½ cup fresh cilantro leaves, chopped
- 1 hot pepper, seeded and chopped (jalapeño is the mildest; you can go hotter from cayenne to habanero, and leave the seeds in for super heat)
- juice of one lime
- pinch of sugar
- kosher or sea salt

Remove papery husks and stems from the tomatillos and cut fruits in half. Place cut side down in a baking pan and broil for 6-8 minutes, until flesh is charred and fruits are easily pierced with a fork.

Place tomatillos in a blender or processor along with onion, cilantro, lime juice, hot pepper and sugar. Puree about 10-20 seconds. Add salt to taste.

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Hybrids

Big Beef- large, red beefsteak tomato. Has been a favorite main season tomato in the past, though variety seems to be losing some vigor. We continue to grow while seeking a suitable replacement.

New Girl – a small red slicer, aptly named as it replaces our former standby “Early Girl”, for which no seeds were available this year.

Mountain Fresh – an early medium-sized red slicer that is also new for us this season. This is a determinate variety which means the entire crop produces fruit in one flush and then stops.

Valley Girl – a later season medium-sized red slicer that we're trialing to replace Big Beef.

Heirlooms

Black Prince – a prolific medium-sized “black” tomato (more accurately described as a deep reddish-purple) that is new for us this year.

Brandywine- large (1+ lbs), irregularly shaped, pink tomatoes. The benchmark for heirlooms, many consider this the best tasting tomato.

Cosmonaut Volkov – a juicy early red slicer that we love for both its flavor and awesome name.

Green Zebra- unusual smallish, green striped tomatoes with rich and juicy green flesh.

Jubilee- a large, productive golden tomato. Good taste, meaty texture and lovely appearance.

Rose de Berne- small, pink tomatoes from France described as hybrids in appearance but heirlooms in taste.

Cherry Tomatoes

Peacevine- a small, tasty red cherry that we've been very happy with the past three seasons.

Sungold- Hands down our favorite cherry tomato. We have watched our children choose these little gold nuggets over candy. Prone to splitting after rain.

Black Cherry – a late cherry with dusky purple color and complex flavor.

White Cherry – an unusual cherry with pale, almost translucent icy yellow skin and mild flavor.