



Urban Harvest

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## Tomatoes in the Kitchen and in the Fall Garden

Bob Randall

June is an excellent month to study tomatoes. Outside, my tomatoes continue to ripen and a couple of young mockingbirds are doing their best to puncture every red one. By picking tomatoes just as they begin to tint, we beat the birds and get plenty of delicious fruits no worse for their premature harvest because they are already turning. The plants themselves are deteriorating everyday as they die from heat, humidity and the fungus diseases that like these conditions. For all but the most disease-prone types, this isn't a concern since the daytime temperatures are already too high for further flower pollination, and all the fruit on the vines will likely ripen at a good size.

If you are growing tomatoes, you are eating lots of them fresh and in many different dishes. At our house, we grow about 20 plants, so we end up canning some, freezing salsa, and of course cooking with them. Right now they are lined up in the kitchen on every available cookie sheet ripening until they turn deep red or the yellow ones turn orange. Then they are eaten or preserved at peak flavor.

### Nancy's Salsa

Salsa if made with little or no salt, and excellent tomatoes is one of the healthiest flavorings you can eat. Former Harris County Extension agent Bill Adams invented a wonderful raw salsa made by processing fresh tomatoes, a lime, garlic cloves, ½ supersweet onion, Creole salt, pepper, cilantro leaves, and jalapenos/ serranos. Nancy Edwards modified this to use what we grow: 12 oz. of cherry tomatoes, 2 handfuls of bought fresh cilantro (or winter frozen cilantro), 1 Tbsp. Metechi or Burgundy garlic, 2 chile pequin, and juice of two fresh calimondins. However you make your salsa, consider freezing enough until the next tomato season.

### Time for Fall Tomatoes

Oddly enough, June is not only tomato harvesting time, but also tomato planting time! Tomato seeds planted now will make plants big enough to transplant in late July or early August, and these will be in flower when the temperatures cool in late September.

Either buy, if you can, good transplants in late July or plant seeds now. These can be in large pots in light shade or even right in the bed where they will grow. Whether you plant seeds directly in the garden or in pots and later transplant, your biggest problem will be the tomato's dislike of our summer heat and the possibility they will die if not watered. Give them a little shade until the temperatures drop into the eighties in the daytime. And if you are going to be away a lot this summer, wait until next spring or get some help.

For general instructions for growing tomatoes, don't miss the article *Ten Tips for Growing Top Tomatoes*, also on this website.

### Which Varieties To Grow?

The biggest problem with growing tomatoes in our area has to do with pollination. For most varieties to pollinate, the flowers need daytime temperatures below 85° and nighttime temperatures between 55° and 70°. Our spring weather is very reliable in this regard, so it is fairly easy to know when to plant in the spring, but in the fall, we sometimes get these temperatures in late September and sometimes do not.

The safest approach is to grow continuously flowering (indeterminate) cherry tomatoes since they have the largest number of blossoms, and therefore are the most likely to have some blooming when the temperatures are right. I am fond of *sweet Chelsea* and the yellow *sungold*. But nearly any cherry type will work well.

If you have some space, you can certainly try some of the wonderful standard varieties and heirlooms. At the Cornelius Nursery tomato tasting, the winning tomato plate entry was a combination of *celebrity* and *brandywine*. Another winner included *Cherokee purple* and *brandywine*. As judge, I didn't know until the end what varieties I was eating, and was frankly surprised that an ordinary variety like *celebrity* rated so highly, but it was at absolutely peak ripeness, and many of the other submissions were not.

If you are fortunate, you may get a few of Gita Van Woerden's *Anna Russian* or any of her three German types: *German Johnson*, *German strawberry*, or *German head*. Or try the luscious and super sweet *Green Zebra*: the green tomato that everyone loves. The surest way to know what to grow is to eat it first.

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2311 Canal Street, Suite 200, Houston, Texas 77003, 713.880.5540, [urbanharvest.org](http://urbanharvest.org)