

As American as Tomatoes

A History of the Tomato

by Carol Brouwer, Ph.D., Harris County Extension Agent—Horticulture,
and Margie Elliott, Harris County Master Gardener
edited and re-issued, March 2006

The tomato traveled great distances over many centuries on its way to become the most popular garden fruit in America. Native to the Andes of Peru, where it first grew in the wild as a bright red, marble-sized, cherry-type tomato, it gradually spread throughout South America and north into Central America. There, several thousand years ago, the *xitomatl*, as it was called in the Nahuatl language, was domesticated through selection for larger and more diverse fruits. Then, for many centuries, the tomato ceased its wanderings.

Soon after Columbus discovered the New World, however, the tomato resumed its travels, and by the mid-sixteenth century, it had accompanied homeward-bound Spanish explorers back to Europe. Upon initially arriving in Spain, it was dubbed *pome dei Moro* (Moorish apple), probably one of its first new names. But the earliest written mention comes from Italy in 1544, and refers to it as *pomo d'oro*, or “golden apple,” evidence perhaps that the first tomatoes to reach the Old World were a yellow variety.

In the following decades, cultivation of several tomato varieties spread in Spain, Italy and France, where it was called *pomo d'amore* (apple of love), possibly a corruption of the early Spanish name. It soon became an accepted food item in the Mediterranean region, but as the tomato traveled north and east through Europe, it was viewed suspiciously and, for more than a century, treated at best as an ornamental. During the Elizabethan era, most English thought that the beautiful red color was a warning signal and were certain the tomato was poisonous. Their reasoning included many factors, from its membership in the nightshade family, to the pungency of its leaves, to plain superstition. German folklore, which associated plants of the nightshade family with witches and werewolves, recognized the similarity between tomatoes and other nightshades and came up with a common name for the tomato that translates to “wolf peach.” In 1753, Carl Linnaeus, honoring this German folk usage, named the tomato *Solanum lycopersicum* (“wolf peach of the nightshade family”). In 1768, botanists adopted the name *Lycopersicon esculentum*, which literally means “edible wolf peach.”

Despite scientific assurance that it was edible, fear of the tomato persisted for many years. Although by the late 1700s, some American home gardeners, including Thomas Jefferson, were growing tomatoes, most people still regarded them suspiciously. But by 1812, tomatoes had become a common enhancement in the Creole gumbos and jambalayas of Southern cooking, and, in other areas of the country, such people as Colonel Robert Johnson were trying to persuade the wary public that the tomato would not kill them. In 1820, Colonel Johnson stood



on the steps of the Salem, New Jersey courthouse and ate a raw tomato! It was reported that the crowd was shocked when the colonel didn't drop dead on the spot. By 1850, the tomato had made its way into most American urban markets. Farmers and home gardeners alike were growing tomatoes. Still, many cookbooks proclaimed that the tomato should be cooked for at least three hours or else it would "not lose its raw taste."

The tomato, along with botany in general, suffered a minor setback in the late 1800s. The tariff act of 1883 placed a ten percent tax on "vegetables in their natural state" but allowed fruits "green, ripened or dried" to enter the country tax-free. Edward L. Hedden, collector of the port of New York, declared the tomato to be a vegetable and therefore subject to taxation. Although importers sued, correctly arguing that the tomato is botanically a fruit, the Supreme Court in 1893 ruled that, regardless of its botanical nature, for tax purposes the tomato is a vegetable.

Late into the nineteenth century, both English and American scientists believed that the tomato caused cancer. Eventually this idea was disproved, and, conversely, cancer-fighting properties of the tomato have recently become widely recognized. Studies show that increased levels of lycopene, an antioxidant found in tomatoes, are correlated with a decreased risk for cancer in the digestive tract, cervix, prostate and pancreas of humans. The tomato is nature's richest source of lycopene, a substance also found in watermelons and pink grapefruits.

After traveling for more than a thousand years, the tomato has now reached six continents and has become the most important processed vegetable in America. The average American consumes more than 23 pounds of processed tomatoes each year. Vine-ripened and processed tomatoes are among the vegetables highest in potassium, vitamins A and C, fiber, lycopene and even protein. After the potato, tomatoes contribute the greatest amount of nutrients to the American diet.



Gardening fact sheets are distributed by Harris County Master Gardeners, community volunteers trained in basic horticulture by Texas Cooperative Extension. For information about Master Gardener volunteer training classes, call Harris County Cooperative Extension at 281.855.5600, or send an e-mail to harris@ag.tamu.edu.