

TOMATO



The tomato is the world's most popular fruit. And yes, just like the pepper and the pumpkin, botanically speaking it is a fruit, not a vegetable. A ripened ovary of a seed plant, the tomato is by definition a fruit, but in 1893 the U.S. Supreme Court over-ruled Mother Nature declaring that tomatoes were not fruits, but vegetables.

While Yuma County tomato acreage is relatively small, the production of tomato transplants within the county is a vital part of tomato production in other areas.

More than 60 million tons of tomatoes are produced per year, 16 million tons more than the second most popular fruit, the banana. Apples are the third most popular (36 million tons), then oranges (34 million tons) and watermelons (22 million tons).

Tomatoes were first cultivated in 700 AD by Aztecs and Incas. Explorers returning from Mexico introduced the tomato into Europe, where it was first mentioned in 1556. The French called it "the apple of love," the Germans "the apple of paradise."

Tomatoes first grew as wild, cherry-size berries in the South American Andes, but the fruit, as we know it today, was developed in Mexico where it was known as tomatil and traveled to Europe by boat with the returning conquistadors.

Upon arrival in Italy, the heart-shaped tomato was considered an aphrodisiac, thus tomato in Italian, poma amoris, means "love apple."

Regarded as poison by American colonists because of its relation to deadly nightshade, the tomato's reputation was saved by Robert Gibbon Johnson, who stood on the New Jersey courthouse steps in 1820, and ate a tomato--with no adverse effects, to the amazement of the town.

The development of "tougher" tomatoes and the invention of the mechanical harvester saved processing tomato industry in the early 1960's, which had struggled with labor problems since WWII. Today, 100 percent of processed tomatoes are machine harvested.

When dealing with fresh vs. processed tomatoes, few similarities exist. Harvested earlier, green and with plenty of juice, fresh contrasts with the vine-ripened, tomatoes processors cherish for their high sugar contents and red color.

The Joy of Cooking lists 64 tomato recipes. These versatile fruits end up in everything from pasta and pizza to Bloody Marys and barbecue sauce and can be stuffed, boiled, stewed, pureed, deviled, glazed, pickled, grilled and fried. Ketchup, tomato sauce, pizza, tamales, cocktail sauce, tomato juice, meatloaf and barbecue sauces have many different flavors, but tomatoes are a main ingredient in these, as well as many other ethnic dishes.

Move over spinach. Among all vegetables except potatoes, tomatoes contribute the greatest amount of nutrients to the American diet.

If you suffer from skin disease, a tomato a day may keep the doctor away, as tomatine, tomato's principle alkaloid, concentrated in its branchy leaves and green fruit, heals certain fungous diseases of the skin.

A star in its own right, the popular tomato is the fruit of choice for 85 percent of the 30 million of us who are home gardeners.

Each man, woman and child in America consumes almost 80 pounds of tomatoes every year. Aside from the potato, tomatoes are America's most important commercial vegetable, both in yearly weight consumed and annual yield.

While sunny California is far and away the world's largest producer of processed tomatoes, accounting for nearly half of the world's total production, the "love apple" is also an international hit, being grown in such diverse nations as Italy, Argentina, Algeria, Taiwan, Australia and Chile.

As hard as other states work to catch up, California's prolific canners process more tomatoes in a few days as Ohio, the second largest producing state, processes during the entire season.

A virtual tomato seed smorgasbord, the Tomato Genetics Stock Center at the University of California, Davis has more than 2,750 genetic varieties of tomatoes.

The largest tomato on record is a 7-pound monster grown in Oklahoma.

If you have ever seen a load of tomatoes rolling down the freeway filled to the brim, you may have wondered what keeps them from smashing themselves. These tomatoes have been selectively bred for over 50 years to be quite different from the tomato you would buy in the store. One of the qualities they have is a much thicker skin than fresh tomatoes, it is this property that allows them to survive the weight of 25,000 pounds of tomatoes without suffering much damage.

There are an incredible amount of differences between store bought tomatoes and tomatoes that are processed for canning and sauces. One of the first and most important is that processed tomatoes are picked ripe and red. In contrast, fresh market tomatoes are picked green and some of the fresh tomatoes are gassed with the fruits own natural ripening hormone called ethylene to promote consistent ripening. The second is that processed tomatoes are used immediately, from the moment of picking less than 6 hours pass until the tomato is in the can. Third, processing tomatoes are completely machine harvested, the only humans needed are for picking out stray vines and any rare tomatoes that are moldy or crushed.

There are at least 10,000 varieties of tomatoes (from the small marble-sized cherry one to the Ponderosa, which can weigh over three pounds).

The jelly-like substance around the seeds contains the highest concentration of vitamin C.

The smallest tomato species are less than three-quarters of an inch in diameter. There are yellow and red tomato varieties.

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