What’s in Season
from the Garden State

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Old Varieties on the Horizon

Huh? What’s’ new about old? In the tomato biz, old is big. Heirloom tomatoes have developed as a niche market for plants and seeds for home gardeners and fresh tomatoes at farm markets. In New Jersey however, there exists a portfolio of old red round tomato varieties that were grown in the early 20th century for both the local canning industry and the fresh market. These tomatoes were known for their outstanding flavor and hence earned the Jersey Tomato claim to fame. Most of these old varieties are no longer on the market, or were never available to home gardeners since they were processing varieties. At Rutgers NJAES we have been working on bringing some of these varieties back for home gardeners and local farm markets. Seeds of the much loved Ramapo and an early season companion Moreton, are available through the Rediscover the Jersey Tomato project: http://njfarmfresh.rutgers.edu/JerseyTomato.html. (If you noticed that Ramapo tomato was in short supply in 2012, that is because our new seed supply was delayed until June – too late for the growing season. The seed is now in and in plentiful supply for the 2013 season.) More old time Jersey Tomato variety seed offerings will be added in the next few years, with one being especially noteworthy.

Recreating History

In 1928 the Campbell’s Soup Company, based in Camden, NJ made a cross between two leading tomato varieties at the time: Marglobe and JTD (named for Dr. John T. Dorrance, a chemist who joined the company in 1897 and invented condensed soup). In 1929, Rutgers plant breeder Lyman Schermerhorn selected the best of these plants and for the next six years conducted field tests and made further selections until in 1934 the most superior selection was released as the “Rutgers” tomato. The Rutgers tomato was a genuine horticultural improvement over other commercial varieties. Breeding objectives resulted in an amazing array of improved attributes, including: pleasing flavor and taste of the juice; more uniform “sparkling” red internal color ripening from center of the tomato outward; freedom from fruit cracking; vigorous healthy foliage to ripen more fruit and reduce sunscald; firm thick fleshy fruit walls for its time, though considered extremely soft by today’s definition of tomato firmness.

Not only did Rutgers provide a top performing tomato for New Jersey’s processors, such as Campbell’s Soup and Heinz, but Rutgers tomato continued to be a preferred choice of commercial growers through much of the mid-twentieth century. It was grown worldwide, and used in breeding and selection of other improved varieties.

While no longer grown commercially, the Rutgers tomato remained popular, especially with home gardeners. Selections of the Rutgers tomato are available through many home garden seed catalogs. However, when Rutgers was released by the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, Professor Schermerhorn invited and encouraged seedsmen to continue selecting for true types in their seed fields. Thus, the original Rutgers tomato line is long lost, and all the seeds sold today are derivative selections, possibly even different cultivars, from the original. We did not have original seed maintained here at Rutgers NJAES.

Dr. Orton and Pete Nitzsche, agricultural resource management agent of Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Morris County have been on a quest to find the old original Rutgers tomato strain. The earliest seeds found from a seed bank were from the 1950’s. How closely matched to the original Rutgers were these seeds? It is difficult to tell. When in 2011 we were provided with Marglobe and JTD seed from Campbell’s Soup Company, the possibility of recreating the cross of the original Rutgers – (or close to it) became a reality. This August, from a field trial of crosses of Marglobe and JTD at the Rutgers Snyder Farm, Orton and Nitzsche selected out the most promising plants that most resemble the documented attributes of the original Rutgers tomato. From these selections, further field trials will be run in 2013 with the selections narrowed even further. The results will be made available in a few years as “retro” Rutgers tomato seed.