



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Long, Chilly Nights Make Me Think of Tomatoes

Kevin Milaeger

I've been spending many January evenings thumbing through seed catalogs, probably like many of you. I started getting them before Thanksgiving, but I can't get in the mood to look at them until after Christmas. By then

some of the companies have already sent two or three of their catalogs. I really don't think reviewing seed catalogs counts as a garden chore, but it is pretty much all we can do at this time of year. Even those of us with a home greenhouse don't start working in them until the weather warms a bit. I've got about twenty different seed catalogs to take up my time, and then

there are the online sources to consider, but there is something about settling in with a paper catalog that is more appealing.



A few of the many.

My purpose in going through all the catalogs is to find interesting varieties that are new to us, or maybe something we haven't tried in a while. After finalizing our choices, we grow the plants in our garden and evaluate them to see if they really do perform better, as the catalogs boldly proclaim. And since we know that you might also like to experiment a little, we grow a few extra plants and offer them for you to try. We do this for a limited time, in mid-May or so. We try to grow about a hundred extra of each, and they are available while they last. Some are sold out in a day or two, and others don't sell out for a couple of weeks. We call this program "Vintage Veggies" even though some of them are modern hybrids. I don't like to put too fine a point



Juliet

on it, and get hung up on definitions. To further confuse things, modern day hybridizers have sometimes turned to "heirloom" varieties for use in their experiments. So, a modern hybrid with two heirloom parents---how does one classify that variety? I just call them modern heirlooms. I know that's an oxymoron, but once explained, it works for most folks.

This year's list is far from completed, but there are some interesting varieties that bear discussing. Many of you are familiar with the tomato called

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Saturday 9am-6pm
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'Juliet.' It has thumb sized fruit, so it is bigger than a cherry and slenderer than a typical plum tomato. It doesn't fit neatly into any category, but it is popular. I always felt the skin was a little thick, but that is a benefit to some, as it helps reduce cracking. Now there is an "improved" form of this variety, called 'Valentine.' The breeder refers to it as a grape tomato, which is reasonable, though it is larger than most grapes. It is very high in lycopene, so that's a good thing. It is also more abundant than 'Juliet', and more flavorful, especially if picked when it is dark red. This is a first for me---I have never seen a catalog description that refers to a precise color for maximum flavor. To me, 'Juliet' was always a little pinkish, so I will have to watch the color on this one when judging it. One confusing thing is that, years ago there was another tomato called 'Valentine.' It was a large paste tomato, an oxheart type. However, the seed source dried up on that about five years ago, and we haven't been able to find it. So, be advised that this new 'Valentine' is a brand-new variety.

photo: www.johnnyseeds.com



Valentine

Many times, I have talked about the Maine based seed company called Johnny's. I like the fact that they are in a cold climate not dissimilar to ours, and that their catalog is thoughtful, without a lot of hyperbole. Johnny's is now offering an early strain of tomato 'Wisconsin 55,' an early hybrid developed at the University of Wisconsin in the 1940's. Johnny's says the quality of many strains of this variety have deteriorated, so they were glad to get some seed that had been frozen at the University since way back when. Now we will be offering it to you this year, and you can see if this is an improvement. (We will also continue to offer this variety from the original seed source until we do a comparison of the two.)

We are also watching something called the Dwarf Tomato Project. This group was started by some dedicated amateur breeders. The tomatoes are bred to have a compact habit---ideal for growing in containers, for folks that don't have garden space. The demand for this type of plant is increasing every year. Even gardeners who have traditional gardens sometimes tire of the giant sprawling indeterminate plants that are so common. Dwarf varieties

photo: www.johnnyseeds.com



Wisconsin 55

are different from determinate (bush) varieties. The dwarfs bear all season (but less than indeterminates), and generally have better flavor than determinates. Years ago, there were only a couple of dwarf red varieties available. Now, thanks to this group, there are about 70 kinds available, in a variety of fruit sizes and colors. More on the horizon, too.

Within this group of "Dwarf Tomato" gardeners, there is a large contingency from Australia. You can tell by the

names of their varieties, often referencing the land "down under." I'm not sure if having been bred down there makes them suitable for our climate, but their descriptions do sound interesting. You can follow this group's efforts online, and you can also be part of the project. I am sure they would welcome feedback, and you can even do some of your own breeding. It's easy to do, but hard to create something really great. Still fun, though. We plan to try several from the Dwarf Tomato Project this year.

Please email me (kevin@milaegers.com) if you have any questions or comments.



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