

August Tomato Update



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Driving around our town I frequently find myself passing a certain farm stand. The vegetable fare currently being offered is announced on removable signs, which change with availability. This stand is about five miles west of Lake Michigan, noticeably warmer than my house which is quite close to the big lake. I expected the stand to have tomatoes a week or more before me, but that seems not to be the case this year. (In addition to weather, the earliness of the tomato variety matters, but I assume everyone is growing at least one “early” variety.) Now, at the start of August, they haven’t yet put up their sign announcing that tomatoes are ready, but at my house I picked and ate my first large red tomato on July 26. It was ‘Cherokee Carbon,’ a modern hybrid, in the newly created class known as “heirloom marriage.” That is, a hybrid with heirloom parents. In this case, ‘Cherokee Purple’ and ‘Carbon.’ Both are so-called “black” tomatoes, but that moniker stretches the truth. The outward appearance is really dark, brownish red, and the inner flesh is a rich, dark red. It was delicious. I decided to weigh it, and it came out at 6 ounces. The fruit on that plant that are yet to ripen are of similar size or a little larger. I grew this one because I hadn’t tried it before. I’m pleased with the flavor and the production. The only drawback was the incidence of blossom end rot on the early fruit. For now, I am overlooking that flaw, and I plan to offer it again next year, in our Vintage Veggie program.



Tomato 'Cherokee Carbon'

If you enjoy vegetable gardening you probably like visiting farmer's markets. Madison's Dane County market is the biggest in the Midwest and it's a fun event, if you can tolerate the crowd. Last weekend I was there, just for fun—not intending on buy much, if anything. There were a number of vendors who were offering tomatoes but they nearly all looked a little too perfect. One of the vendors had nothing but tomatoes on her 15' long display. When I quizzed her, she offered that her tomatoes were grown in a hoop house, with the sides opened up. This is a hoop style greenhouse, usually fairly low to the ground to minimize the amount of heat required. Some growers use heat in spring only if the weather is well below freezing, some don't use heat at all. (Presumably they start their plants a little later.) All this makes for a fairly safe, early growing environment. Even though the plants are usually grown right in the ground I feel the flavor is somehow affected, and not in a good way. I bought one tomato just to see... From another vendor who offered an assortment of vegetables, I was pleased to see tomatoes being offered by variety name. This is long overdue. You wouldn't think of going into a market and buying ten pounds of apples, without specifying which variety. Why not tomatoes? For the vendor, this creates customer loyalty, and the customer knows exactly what they

are getting. I bought a couple of their tomatoes too, but forgot to ask how they were grown. One thing that did strike me was the price of tomatoes. I saw no tomatoes under \$3.50 per pound, and the highest was \$8.00 per pound. Since some tomatoes weigh over two pounds, it makes more and more sense to grow your own. Not to mention all the fun you'll have.



Tomatoes at market



Tomatoes at market

I thought I was keeping a close eye on things but I guess I got lazy. I glanced up at the top of one of my 7' tall tomato plants and realized a lot of leaves were missing. A sure sign of tomato hornworms. These little monsters can do a lot of damage in a hurry. They have a lot of growing to do in their short life as a caterpillar. Their primary color is apple green, so they blend in well with the stems of the tomato plants and they are hard to spot. It took me a couple minutes before I found one and then two, three, and four. Sometimes they eat the fruit as well as the leaves but I think I got them before they found the fruit. I'll keep checking to see if there are more that I missed. I have ten tomato plants at home and another dozen at my garden at Milaeger's, but only one plant had hornworms. I never use a spray on them, I just hand pick them. It's tempting to want to destroy them, but they eventually turn into a beautiful moth so I don't want to disturb that process. If you grew tomatoes the previous year there are usually a few unwanted plants that volunteer

from seed that got scattered. I relocated the hornworms onto those unwanted plants and let them feast away. Everyone's happy.



Damage from tomato hornworms



Tomato hornworms

Please email me (kevin@milaegers.com) with your questions and comments!