

This article was written by [Dr. Leonard Perry, Extension Professor, University of Vermont](#)

Winter and spring months are the times gardeners face a seemingly endless list of tomato varieties in seed catalogs. An interactive listing with consumer ratings from Cornell University (vegvariety.cce.cornell.edu) has over 800 varieties which you can sort various ways! Even if you don't grow your own, you may face a large selection at garden stores in spring.

Rather than end up with a variety that may not suit your tastes or needs, and to make your selection process easier, there are a few traits to keep in mind when choosing tomato seeds or plants. Plant habit, fruiting season, fruit shape and color, use, and disease resistance are five main traits to consider.

There are four main growth habits for tomato plants—determinate, indeterminate, compact, and the rather new hanging or “tumbling”. The latter include cultivars (cultivated varieties) such as ‘Tumbling Tom’ which are mainly for hanging baskets, or hanging over sides of containers or raised beds. Compact cultivars such as ‘Patio’ are good for small spaces and containers. There are a few cultivars such as ‘Celebrity’ that are semi-determinate, with traits in between the other types.

Determinate or “bush” tomatoes grow to a certain point, then produce a fruit cluster and sideshoots. Usually the typical tomato wire cage suffices for support, and you won't need to prune off any shoots. Determinate cultivars usually bear fruit early, and over a shorter period of 4 to 6 weeks. This is helpful if you want to pick lots of fruit at the same time for sauces or canning, or want some early harvests.

Indeterminate tomatoes keep on growing like a vine, hence the term you may see for them is “vining.” Fruit clusters on indeterminate are spaced farther apart along the stems (often every third leaf) than determinate, and often produce more and larger fruit, and over a longer period.

With more leaves, it may take diseases (if present) longer to affect all of them. The more leaves often result in more sugars and so sweeter fruit. Indeterminate definitely will need staking, usually with 5-foot supports, and pruned so there are no more than four main stems.

Fruiting season, often seen as “time to maturity”, is the “approximate” time from sowing or

planting out (check the description to see which it refers to), until first fruit ripen.

Often in cold climates with short growing seasons this is important, since a long-season cultivar such as 'Big Boy' (78 days, determinate) may not have enough time to ripen many fruit (or you may need to start them earlier indoors to get a jump on the season). 'Early Girl' (59 days, indeterminate) and 'Fourth of July' (49 days, indeterminate) are a couple of good early cultivars.

Tomatoes are really all about their fruit, which range in shape, size, color, and uses. They vary from large rounded to small cherry or pear shapes. Colors range from the typical red to pinks, yellow (such as the small cherry-type 'Sun Gold'—65 days, indeterminate), orange (such as one of my favorite heirlooms 'Jaune Flammée'—80 days, indeterminate), striped (as with 'Green Zebra'—78 days, determinate), even black (as with 'Cherokee Purple'—85 days, indeterminate). Yellow and orange tend to have less acidity and a milder flavor than others.

In addition to aesthetics, an important fruit trait to consider is the use. "Slicers" such as 'Big Beef' (75 days, indeterminate) have large fruit 4 to 8 inches across, good for slicing for eating fresh or putting on sandwiches. "Cherry" or small-fruited cultivars (some have pear-shaped fruit such as 'Yellow Pear'—75 days, indeterminate) have many small fruit, often an inch wide, in clusters.

These are great eaten alone or in salads. Then there are a range of sizes in between for all manner of fresh eating and with varying tastes.

For sauces, try the popular 'Roma' (75 days, determinate). Making sauce, and then canning or freezing it, is a great way I've found to use up an overabundant harvest, such as from planting many varieties. You'll get some wonderful and unique flavors from such a mix.

Tomatoes can get several serious diseases, so look for cultivars with some resistance listed with letter symbols the catalogs define, such as V for Verticillium wilt or LB for late blight. A couple of newer cultivars with excellent resistance to several diseases are 'Mountain Magic' (75 days, indeterminate) and 'Defiant' (70 days, determinate).

There are a few other traits you may see mentioned. Some seeds and plants are produced organically, and are so noted. A rather new concept is grafting, as is done with fruit trees, to attach a desired cultivar on top (scion) to another below (understock) for benefits of the latter such as vigor and disease resistance.

You may want to choose hybrids, created from crossing two or more parents. This often

gives benefits, such as more or larger fruit. But, to be able to collect and sow your own seed, you'll need "open pollinated" selections. Many heirlooms are open-pollinated.

This latter group—heirlooms, or older cultivars—have become quite popular, with some claiming they have better flavor, and they often have uniquely colored fruits. 'Brandywine' (90-100 days, indeterminate) and its several strains and colors is one of the most popular heirlooms.

Even after considering all these traits, you'll learn through trial which cultivars taste best to you—something quite subjective that will vary with each person. By growing your own tomatoes, particularly from seeds, you can try many that are not available otherwise.