

Heirloom tomatoes just seemed to fit with the way Carolyn Male gardened. She could never just grow carrots; she had to try eight varieties at once.

And so it was natural that the professor of microbiology at the College of Saint Rose would grow more than 4,000 varieties of heirloom tomatoes in her lifetime, many of them at the Shaker farm she grew up on in Loudonville. Retired from Saint Rose since 1999, she now lives on a rocky spread of land in Salem, Washington County, where she can't keep more than a half-dozen tomato plants going at a time, but she has others grow for her and send her pictures (and seeds).

As the author of "100 Heirloom Tomatoes for the American Garden" (Workman, 1999), she remains one of the authorities on heirloom tomatoes. She's 75, and isn't as mobile as she once was, but she's still an active moderator at the website tomatoville.com, an online forum for those who appreciate the uniqueness of heirlooms. Heirloom tomatoes come from "open-pollinated" plants, which means if you save and plant the seeds the following year, you'll get the same variety of tomato again, assuming that your plants weren't accidentally cross-pollinated with another variety by a busy bee or through some other happenstance. Heirloom tomatoes are the antithesis of the barely red cardboard spheres you'll find in your supermarket in December. They're different colors (some even ripen to be green), they've got funky shapes and textures, unusual names (Mortgage Lifter, Cherokee Purple and German Red Strawberry) and great back stories (like the Dr. Carolyn, named by a friend after a certain tomato expert in Salem).

Male says there are more than 15,000 varieties of heirlooms, while you can only find about 300 varieties of hybrids available to the general public.

And with the rise of farmers markets, heirlooms are becoming part of the public's kitchen education, with people willing to pay \$5 a pound to fancy up their salad or BLTs.

"People have learned more about them," Male says.

But for Male, who started growing heirlooms in the early 1980s, the fun is in the gardening.

"The excitement for me is always looking for the perfect tomato, knowing that that is unobtainable," she says.

Contrary to what some believe, hybrids aren't more tolerant to the type of disease we see in this growing zone (foliage diseases) than heirlooms are, she says. And Male says the best-tasting hybrids simply aren't as tasty as the finest heirlooms.

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