



The Tomato

Considering the fact that the tomato was originally thought to be poisonous and unfit for human consumption, it has come a long way. Now seasonal eaters and gardeners alike wait impatiently for the first ripe tomato of the season. At our markets the tomato is the most sought after fruit we offer. U.S. growers produce more than 2 billion pounds of tomatoes annually and import another 700-800 million pounds from Mexico.

Thousands of varieties of tomatoes are known. Commercial growers tend to utilize the newer hybrids which are selected for their uniformity (they pack into boxes efficiently), thick skin (to survive mechanical harvesting and shipping) and slow ripening (for picking green and gassing with ethylene when redness is desired.) Smaller, local market growers choose varieties that emphasize flavor, disease resistance and nutritional content. Tomatoes come in all colors – red, black, green when ripe, white, orange, yellow, and pink – and shapes.

Because tomatoes are a warm weather plant, it's best to start with young stocky transplants rather than from direct seeding. Plant outside after danger of frost is past or two weeks earlier with plastic mulch and row covers. Bury the stem up to the lower leaves when transplanting. Staked tomatoes can be planted every 18 inches, unstaked allow 3 feet between plants.

Determinate tomatoes are a shorter plant which fits easily into tomato cages; however, they set fruit for a limited time and then quit. Indeterminate tomatoes continue to grow and set fruit until the vines freeze in the fall. As they continue to grow they can become overwhelming unless they are trimmed. All tomatoes benefit from staking as it keeps the foliage and fruit off the ground. This decreases damage from slugs, rot, sun scald and cracking. It also helps the fruit to ripen faster.

Nutritionally, tomatoes are rich in vitamins A and C, folate and potassium. They also contain the proven anticancer agent, lycopene.

Recipes

As soon as the broccoli and tomatoes are both ready in the garden this recipe becomes a favorite in Lil' Ladybug's kitchen. It is even better if you can get some fresh tarragon for the dish.

Fresh Broccoli-Tomato Platter

Makes 6 servings

Microwave dish

- 1/2 pound fresh broccoli
- 1/3 cup butter
- 1/8 teaspoon tarragon
- 1/8 teaspoon pepper
- 2 fresh tomatoes
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- Add slices of carrots and cauliflower if desired

Trim 1 inch from bottom of broccoli stalks, cut flowerettes from stalks leaving about 1 inch of

stalk attached. Set aside. Cut stalk into pieces, chop finely. Cover broccoli in microwave safe dish and cook on high for 3-4 minutes or until tender. Pile the mixture into the center and arrange flowerettes around chopped broccoli. Microwave on high 6 - 8 minutes. Let stand covered. Melt butter and stir in lemon juice and tarragon. Uncover broccoli. Cut each tomato into 8 wedges and arrange on broccoli. Arrange carrots and cauliflower over broccoli if you want. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Drizzle butter mixture over veggies. Microwave uncovered for 1 1/2 to 2 minutes or until tomatoes are heated through.

Tomato Pasta Salad

1 package (7 ounces) macaroni shells
2 medium chopped tomatoes (about 1 ½ cups) or use an equivalent of cherry tomatoes, halved
2 green onions chopped
2 cloves garlic minced
1/4 cup chopped parsley
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 teaspoons chopped basil
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon coarsely cracked pepper

Cook macaroni as directed on package; drain. Rinse with cold water; drain. Mix remaining ingredients. Toss macaroni and tomato mixture. Cover and refrigerate about 2 hours or until chilled.

Tomato Soup

Makes 8 servings

1 tablespoon butter
2 cloves garlic minced
2 carrots chopped
2 stalks celery chopped
2 quarts tomatoes
Pinch sugar
1/2 cup fresh basil
Salt and pepper to taste
Grated parmesan cheese

Heat butter in skillet; sauté garlic, carrots, and celery. Add tomatoes and simmer 20 minutes. Add sugar, basil, salt, and pepper, simmer 5-10 minutes longer. Top with Parmesan.

Mike's Salsa

Medium hot salsa - Lots of flavor with a little heat

8 ripe salsa tomatoes
1 jalapeño pepper
1 large onion
1/4 cup olive oil (if grilled)
1 lime
1 Poblano pepper
1 Anaheim pepper

1 bulb garlic
1 small can hot & spicy v-8 juice
Salt and pepper to taste

Prepare vegetables as follows. Peel tomatoes. Cut peppers in half lengthwise and remove stems and seeds (See Caution Note below) Peel skins from onion and garlic. Add all of the above to a food processor and chop. Add ingredients to a 4 quart pan and add V-8 juice, the juice of the lime and salt and pepper to taste. Heat through slowly to blend the flavors. Do not bring to a boil. Cool and then refrigerate for an hour or two before serving.

For a Roasted Flavor - After brushing the vegetables with olive oil, grill the tomatoes, peppers, onions, and garlic over hot coals until the skins of the pepper are dark. Peel, chop and blend the ingredients together.

Caution - Use rubber gloves when dealing with hot peppers. They are very hot and can blister your skin. I work with peppers outside on the picnic table to prevent the fumes from damaging my lungs.

STORAGE TIPS:

- Do not refrigerate tomatoes as they will lose their flavor. Tomatoes can be held at room temperature for up to a week or longer if they are still ripening.
- Tomatoes can be frozen whole. Place clean, blemish free tomatoes on a cookie sheet and freeze. When solid place in zip-lock freezer bags and replace in the freezer. Remove only as many tomatoes as you need at a time and use in cooking and purees.
- Under ripe tomatoes will continue to ripen stored out of the sun at 60-75 degrees.