



Garden Queen



Someone famous once said that, “Our sense of patriotism comes from the food we ate as children.” My love of country comes from the fried tomatoes served in my Aunt Julia’s kitchen. Not-quite-fully-ripe tomatoes were thickly sliced, sprinkled with a bit of salt and pepper, dredged in flour and fried in a cast iron skillet containing the remnants of fried sugar cured ham from her smoke house.

For many gardeners the tomato is the “Garden Queen.” Her lineage is traced to Central America. She grows to a petite three feet tall (determinate) or to a statuesque ten feet (indeterminate). Her vines are adorned by emerald leaves with small to massive orbs in blue, black, red, purple and yellow.

Growing vegetables in our Red Georgia Clay is a bit of science and art. First, the science, all vegetables require at least six hours of sunlight. The Queen does best when planted in the warm months of spring, after the last

frost, and can bear fruit until the first frost. Second, vegetables are miserable when their roots are submerged in standing water. A simple test for proper drainage is to dig a one foot hole; fill it with water and wait a day before filling it again, if the water is gone within 12 hours your garden has excellent drainage. Third, our soil has two outstanding characteristics: (1) when dry it is the consistency of concrete and (2) contains no measurable amount of nitrogen. This important nutrient is added to the soil through organic or inorganic fertilizers. So, make peace with the Red Georgia Clay, install a raised planter bed and fill it with a good quality garden soil. Please bring a soil sample to the Extension Office for analysis by the University of Georgia Soil Testing Laboratory and we encourage you to amend your soil with the recommended fertilizer.

Beware of the Queen's nemesis: the Tomato Hook Worm, which can devour her in a single sitting. Simply planting wildflowers will attract pollinators and fortify your Queen from the inevitable assault of her nemesis. The vibrant blooms of zinnias and marigolds attract pollinating bees and butterflies and a tiny wasp whose larvae eagerly gobble up the Queen's archenemy.

The art of growing starts with the plants you purchase from a garden center. The Queen is unique among vegetables because its roots grow along the length of her stem. Carefully pinch off all but the top 2-3 leaves and plant so that only those leaves are above ground. If your garden area is limited supporting the Queen with a wire basket or a stake is an excellent way to conserve space. However, a standard wire basket is unable to adequately support the weight of an indeterminate plant. One solution is to sink an 8' by 2" by 2" length of pressure treated lumber in the ground and as the main stem grows tie it to the stake.

Heirloom tomatoes have gained a renewed popularity among gardeners because the store bought hybrids bred in part for their consistent red color, size and shape are maligned for their bland taste. An heirloom tomato is a variety that has been a consistent performer over 40 years. They tend to have a higher sugar content and simply taste better.

Lastly, my favorite tomato is the versatile Cherokee Purple Hybrid. This indeterminate bears a sweet, low acidic purple fruit which can reach a massive 1 ½ pounds. They make a great tomato sandwich, an excellent spaghetti sauce base, is marvelous fried, or simply sliced with a dollop of mayonnaise.

The author of this article, Robbie Cheatham, is a Paulding County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer. As representatives of the University of

Georgia Cooperative Extension, Master Gardener Extension Volunteers are trained experts, who answer questions about home horticulture, sustainable landscaping, and environmentally friendly gardening practices using unbiased, research-based information from the University of Georgia. For more information on gardening in Paulding, contact a Master Gardener or the County Extension Agent at the Paulding County Cooperative Extension Office at 770-443-7616 or check us out online at www.ugaextension.org/paulding.

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