Growing tomatoes is perhaps one of the most popular garden vegetables to grow. There’s nothing like a home grown tomato and the satisfaction of being able to grow and eat the varieties you love! However, our climate is not so accommodating to easy tomato growth like you may be familiar with if you gardened in more temperate climates. Insects, disease and humidity can be sources of great frustration for tomato growers in the Southeast. This guide is a compilation of tips and knowledge we’ve learned over the years of trying to grow tomatoes with mixed successes and failures! Growing tomatoes here can be done!

**VARIETY SELECTION**

**Determinate vs. Indeterminate**

- Determinate tomatoes have a set growth and produce all their tomatoes at one time- this is good for gardeners that want a known end to the season, want to preserve the harvest, and use smaller equipment for staking/trellising.

- Indeterminate tomatoes have extended growth and production through the season, but tend to be much larger and require larger cages, substantial trellising, or other support.

- Dwarf tomatoes are relatively rare but many new varieties are available thanks to the Dwarf Tomato Breeding Project. They are much more stocky and compact in nature, typically with very rugose and dark green leaves. They do not grow out of control like indeterminates and are great options for space limited gardens. The term “dwarf” applies to the plant, not the fruit size which can range from cherry to huge beefsteak sized fruits.

**Seeds vs. Transplants**

- Transplants can save time and are ready to plant, but cost more money than seeds. Be careful to ensure they were hardened off, are not root bound, and appear healthy.

- Seeds provide a nearly endless choice of varieties, you can grow them correctly and your way! They take more time and risk is greater to get them to full maturity. You must have the correct set-up to make them successful.

**Tips for picking a winner**

- When looking at transplants or seeds, a careful review of the description is helpful. Specifically, look for:
  - Short days to harvest, the longer the days the greater the risk.
  - Does well in humid and hot climates.
  - Has disease resistance.

- Grow what you eat- no reason to grow cherries if you do not eat them.

- Decide what is a success for you. A shelf of canned tomatoes, finding a successful new variety, tasty sandwich slicers, salad tomatoes?

- Be realistic for how long you plan to grow and maintain your tomatoes, and when you’ll end the season.

- How much space do you have to grow? Don’t plan too much that you can’t maintain, or will end up over-crowding.

- If you’ve had previous disease issues, be sure to select varieties that have resistance or tolerance to common diseases.

- Having a hard time with getting tomatoes to full maturation? Seek tomatoes with shorter harvest dates.

**Heirloom, Hybrid and Open-Pollinated**

- Heirlooms- an older variety, having been around about 100 years or so, or over several generations
of stewardship. There are many varied cultivars of
different shapes, sizes and colors. Seeds can be saved for
next season’s tomatoes. Many have been
preserved for flavor or particular uses, but not
necessarily acclimated for our area. Disease
pressure can be high or production low, depending
on the variety.

• Hybrids (F1)- bred for disease resistance and high
  production. Flavor is not always a concern for
  hybrids as other commercial qualities like shipping
tolerance, productivity, shape, firmness, and color
take priority. You can save the seeds but cannot
  expect to get the same plant next year. They do not
  come “true to type” and you must purchase new
  seeds each year.

• Open-pollinated (OP)- seeds can be saved from
  these varieties and as long as you don’t allow them
to cross-pollinate in the garden with other tomato
  varieties, they will come “true to type”. This means
  that if you save seeds from OP Green Zebras, when
  you plant those seeds they will grow into Green
  Zebras. All heirlooms are OP (unless there has been
  an unknown contamination/cross-pollination).

**Fruit size**

• Currant - These are the smallest tomatoes, about
  the size of a pea. Good for garnishing, salads, fresh
  eating and snacking.

• Grape- Grape tomatoes are oblong, like a grape,
  and about the same size. These are usually eaten
  fresh or used in salads, and are often sweet.

• Cherry- Small round and average about 1”
  diameter. The most common use is whole in salads.

• Pear- Pear-shaped and about the same size as a
  cherry tomato.

• Plum/Paste- Oblong fruits that are most often
  used in pastes and sauces.

• Slicing/Globe- Medium-sized tomatoes that are
  commonly found in grocery stores. The size makes
  it perfect for using in meals like sandwiches and
  salads, hence their name – slicers. They are also
  great for canning and sauces.

• Stuffer- Internal hollow structure great for
  stuffing.

• Beefsteak- The largest sized tomatoes, prized by
  many. Can be over 2 pounds, depending on the
  variety.

*Variety Recommendations are Listed in Appendix A*

**SEED STARTING**

*When to start?*

• How early do you want your tomatoes, how much
time do you want to spend, and how much soil do
you have available?

• If you start early (recommended), you will need to
  re-pot into larger containers.

• If you are planning to start seedlings outside of a
  greenhouse start mid to late December, but expect
to be in something larger than a 4” plastic
  container by outdoor planting time in March or
  April.

• If you have a greenhouse, you can get started in
  January or even February, move up to a 4” plastic
  container and quite possibly plant them outdoors
  at this size.

• Growth rate depends on many factors, and how
  much up-potting you have to do will be determined
  by these (i.e. light and temperature conditions).

*Growing medium/potting mix*

• Always use sterile mix to start seeds to avoid
disease problems.

• Avoid the Jiffy mix from box stores, the material is
generally old and hydrophobic.
• Recommend the brand Sungro either the superfine germinating mix, or MVP.
• As the plants get ready to re-pot you can move up to a chunkier material which will be cheaper. We make our own mix using 2 parts bagged potting soil, 2 parts compost, and 1 part worm castings.

**Growing containers**

• Start with 1 to 2 seeds in a 2.5 x 3” container, or seedling flat (we like 72 cells), gradually moving up to a 4” single pot, and then half gallon containers if needed, or plant into your garden.

• Do not start in large pots. The more soil to seed, the greater the chance of disease.

• When reusing containers, clean well and sanitize with a bleach solution of 9 parts water to 1 part bleach.

**How many to start?**

• How many do you really want to plant and share?
• There are no shortcuts in planting- you will either pay it on the front end or the back end. Use it to your advantage.

**Germination success**

• Try to maintain a warm soil temperature by keeping under lights, covering with a clear plastic cover, and/or use a heat mat.

• Ensure seeds are fresh by looking at the date printed on the packet. Anything older than 10 years, especially if they’ve been kept in poor conditions may have lower germination success, and you can oversow to accommodate.

• Germination should occur in about 7 days after planting, but may happen sooner.

• Rule of thumb: never plant seeds deeper than their width. Tomato seeds need not be planted deep at all!

• Keep seeded pots and trays moist, but not overly wet. If they dry out it could impact the germination success.

**Lighting!**

• A growing tomato needs lots of light! Low light causes lanky seedlings that will not be able to support themselves.

• Avoid window sills unless it gets 6 – 8 hours of sun, at the very least! Keep turning them for even exposure.

• Keep them outside in full sun as much as possible if they are not in a well lit greenhouse.

**Common problems**

• Damping off- a fungal disease caused by overly wet and cool conditions. Use a sterile well-draining seed starting mix, maintain warmer temperatures, get full light exposure, and good air flow.

• Helmet head- the seed coat gets stuck to the emerging seed. Ensure you are using fresh seeds and water regularly. If it’s not too stuck you can gently remove the seed coat to help the seedling.

**When to pot up**

• Wait until the seedling has its first true leaves, better yet, wait until the second set of true leaves are forming.

• Do not wait until the roots fully encase the container and are root bound.

• Do not allow more than one seedling per container after the first re-pot, it will slow the growth of both plants.

• Seedlings that come up late or are much smaller than the others should be culled. They have a tendency to be weaker and should not take up your time and money.

**Fertilizing and Mycorrhizae**
• The plant has all it needs in the seed leaves, up till the first repotting when true leaves form.
• When repotting into 4” or so pots, use anything that is less than 10-10-10 in very small amounts (~1tsp). Nitrogen is a concern when it is getting close to flowering/fruiting time.
• Use diluted foliar sprays like compost tea on the seedlings if you want, but not necessary.
• While not necessary, it is beneficial to apply mycorrhizae spores on the roots during re-pot or transplanting time. It builds a symbiotic relationship between plant and beneficial fungi.
• The plants trade exudates (carbohydrates) to the fungi for nutrients not readily available to the plant along with water.
• Plants are more productive than plants without it.
• If you are growing them in lower light indoors, it will be too much of a shock to plant outside without acclimation to high light, and fluctuating day/night temperatures etc.
• If grown inside or in a greenhouse, use an oscillating fan to build a stronger stem and increase air flow. The more stable and semi-outdoor conditions may negate the need for hardening off.
• If done properly, the plant will handle almost whatever nature throws at it.

MAINTENANCE

Planting
• When danger of frost has passed, you can plant (March 15 and as late as mid April).
• If you plant earlier, be prepared to cover in the event of cold weather
• Plant deeply, remove bottom stems that are still tender and bury the tomato as deep as you can up to the next lowest branch.
• They will form roots along the buried stem and be much stronger.
• For some nematode prevention and nutrition, throw in a handful of crab meal. Approximately 1 cup in a gallon pot.
• Be sure to water in well, especially the first week or two.
• Mulch with straw, pine needles, or leaves to preserve moisture and avoid soil splashing onto plants during rain.

Fertilizing and irrigating
• Tomatoes are fairly heavy feeders so will need good enriched soil and compost, as well as occasional doses of fertilizer.
If you apply good compost and side dress a couple times throughout the season, you may not need much more.

Be careful not to provide too much nitrogen (N), which will result in luscious plants with little fruit.

A little extra phosphorus (P) like bone meal and rock phosphate will help encourage flowering and fruiting.

Ideal NPK ratio is 1:4:2.

Container grown tomatoes will require more frequent fertilization and irrigation.

Adequate and even watering is essential and will depend on your soil, mulching, plant health, and whether it is container or in-ground.

Drip irrigation is great for this.

A little wilting mid-day is ok, but if plants do not recover later on, they may need more water and heavier mulch to cool the soil and retain moisture.

Never wet the foliage! This can lead to disease. Water at the roots.

**Staking and support**

Most indeterminate varieties should be supported somehow to prevent disease, promote better growth, and make picking easier.

Dwarf or determinate plants are less likely to need it.

Tomato cages are not recommended as most are too small and weak to support a well growing plant.

Individual staking or using the Florida weave is recommended. It can’t be beat for efficiency for a straight row of tomatoes.

**Pruning**

- Keep plants properly pruned to prevent disease.
- Prune bottom branches early for a nice clean trunk, and to prevent branches from drooping to the soil where they can become diseased.
- Suckering is not needed for dwarf or determinate varieties generally, although a very full and dense plant could benefit from a light suckering.
- While it is not necessary to sucker, it can help some unwieldy indeterminate plants to have better aeration.
- It’s a balance, removing too many suckers may reduce yield.
- Best to sucker when they are tender enough to lightly pinch off with your fingers. Cutting thick suckers can injure the plant.
- Topping is done to force a plant to only ripen existing tomatoes, not focusing on new ones, so a good technique to do toward the end of the season to avoid new flowers and fruit from forming.
SEED SAVING

What varieties to save
- Tomato seeds are very easy to save from and you should absolutely do it!
- It’s generally not recommended to save seeds from hybrids, they will not grow “true to type” because they are unstable varieties.
- Only save from open-pollinated varieties, which most are unless they say hybrid or F1 on the seed packet.
- Consider saving from varieties that have any of the following characteristics:
  - You really love them and can’t imagine life without them!
  - The seeds and plants are rare or hard to come by.
  - It’s something you’d like to improve over time by selecting the best each season.

Population and Isolation
- Tomatoes are generally self-pollinated, but their ability to cross with other tomatoes really depends on the variety, flower structure, your garden set-up, and pollinator pressure.
- The flowers are pendant (hanging down) and mature pollen sheds downward upon the stigma (female), thus causing self-fertilization.
- If growing more than one variety, a good practice is to save from the earliest fruits before insects get interested in the season’s tomato flowers and mix them up.
- That said, it can be fun to create new varieties by allowing different ones to cross-pollinate.
- It is recommended to always save from as many plants as possible, although just one will suffice. At least 5-10 plants is good, but 20+ is even better for a diverse genetic selection and ability to observe variation.
- Bagging individual flowers before they open is an easy way to isolate flowers from other varieties. Remove the bag after they have opened and the flower is falling off (has pollinated itself).
- Clearly mark this newly developing fruit with a durable marker like yarn or flagging tape, this is the fruit you will save seed from.
- Different varieties should be spaced about 10-50ft from one another to help avoid cross-pollination; farther is safer! Every garden and variety is different, you may find that cross pollination is not a concern at all, or very common.
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Tomato Flower and Fruit Anatomy

**Selection**
- Consider what qualities you are most interested in when saving seed.
- Flavor, vigor, disease resistance, earliness etc. are all traits you can select for.
- Never save seed from less than desirable plants that do not impress.

**Seed processing and storage**
- Tomato seeds should be fermented to remove the outer jelly-like coating on the seed before storage.
- Squeeze seeds into a jar, stir and let sit for 24-72 hours. How long depends on how quickly the ferment goes.
- Stir every day and observe the natural layer of mold that forms on top.
- Rinse and strain seeds if it seems like the jelly coating has been removed.
- Good seeds sink, bad ones float. Drain the bad ones along with the gross water and tomato goop.
- Dry on a cloth napkin or coffee filter (not paper towel or newspaper as the seed sticks) for several days and then store somewhere cool, dark and dry.
- Make sure to label your seeds with the variety, year seed was saved and any growing or eating notes!

**BREEDING YOUR OWN VARIETIES**

*Why breed your own?*
- With some intention and basic knowledge, you can improve existing varieties or create your own!
- Figure out your goals: flavor, growth habit, vigor, shape, size? The answers become the shape of the project going forward.
- Start shaping new varieties or improving them by heavily selecting from existing varieties that show interesting variations, or exhibit desired qualities.
- Intentionally breed new ones by making deliberate crosses, looking for traits you like.
- Genetic variability for insect resistance is potential for home gardeners as commercial breeding considers field use of insecticides as the solution.
- Orange tomatoes are most nutritious and home breeders could work with those.
- Of course flavor is a good one, and being so subjective, you can save for the ones you love the most.

*Getting started*
- Pick one trait to focus on and stick with it.
- Decide what your goals are.
- Grow out as many plants as you can: 25, 50 or 100; more is better!
- Expect to do repeated selections each year until you reach stability with each objective.
- It can take at least six generations or more to develop a new stable variety.
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- F1 is the first generation, a hybrid cross, it will show the dominant traits of each parent and be pretty consistently uniform (assuming the parents were stable).
- F2 is the self-pollinated and saved seed from the F1 generation; variability will start to appear now but avoid heavy selection, save lots of seed and grow out as many plants as you can fit in the garden.
- Selections from F2 should be made on highly heritable traits including growth habit, fruit size, shape, color, maturity, and disease or pest resistance.
- F3 is the self-pollinated and saved seed from the F2 generation and so on.
- Continue to select for the traits you desire in each generation until you have a stable variety.
- Growing till F8-F10 generation is typical to obtain a new, stable, open-pollinated varieties.
- A great resource is “How to Breed Tomatoes for Organic Agriculture” by Organic Seed Alliance, available online.

Hand-pollinating
- Decide which will be the pollen receiver (female) and pollen donor (male).
- Use a variety with an obvious recessive trait (potato leaf, dwarf, determinate) for the female. Success of the cross will be easily seen when growing out the F1 seed, which will exhibit the dominant growth characteristics of the male donor.
- Select flowers at the appropriate stage for removal of the anther cone.
- Flowers are selected when in late bud stage, sepals have started to open and petals are changing color from light to bright yellow, but the petals are still tightly shut.
- Once petals start to open, it’s too late, anthers are already shedding pollen.
- Usually the best time is in the morning.
- Carefully remove (i.e. emasculate) the anther cone.
- Collect pollen from the male donor by vibrating the flower over a collection vessel.
- Humid conditions can make pollen collection difficult.
- Dip the female pistil into the pollen, repeat daily for a few days.
- Mark flowers so you know it is crossed, take notes.
- If pollinated blossom drops off, try the cross again. Tomato pollen lasts a long time; weeks at room temperature, or desiccated and refrigerated for months!
- Save seed from new F1 hybrid.
- Next season, grow new F1 seed and note characteristics of plant and fruit, save the seed. This is now the F2 generation.
- Grow as many F2 plans as you can fit into the garden; carefully observe and save seeds from each plant (F3).
- Clearly note which ones meet your project goals and focus on those moving forward.
- Repeat as many generations as needed to find a stable variety, then name it!
RESOURCES

- *Epic Tomatoes* by Craig LeHoullier
- *Breed Your Own Vegetable Varieties* by Carol Deppe
- *How to Breed Tomatoes for Organic Agriculture* by Organic Seed Alliance ([available online](#))
- *Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide* by James Stephens ([online PDF](#))
- *Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide* by James Stephens ([full book](#))
- Tips for Growing Tomatoes by UF IFAS ([available online](#))
- *Tomato Seed Production: an organic seed production manual for seed growers in the Mid-Atlantic and Southern U.S.* by Jeff McCormack ([available online](#))
- *The Seed Garden: The Art and Practice of Seed Saving* Edited by Lee Buttala and Shanyn Siegel
- *Tomato Seed Production Guide* by Organic Seed Alliance ([available online](#))

NOTES

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Appendix A: Variety Recommendations. Please note that this list changes over time as new varieties are discovered. There may be many missing from this list!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variety</th>
<th>Hybrid or Open-Pollinated</th>
<th>Indeterminate or Determinate</th>
<th>Color</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Currant</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coyote</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Everglades</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
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<td>Matt’s Wild Cherry</td>
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<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cherry</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Amy’s Wild Apricot</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Orange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barry’s Crazy Cherry</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
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<td>Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellevue Cherry</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black Cherry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Conie Pink</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Pink</td>
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<tr>
<td>Egg Yolk</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Nugget</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juane Flamme (large cherry)</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Yellow/Orange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juliet (grape tomato)</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Red Cherry</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
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<td>Linda’s Wild Cherry</td>
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<td>Sugar Snack</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
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<td>Red</td>
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<td>Sungold</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
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<td>Orange</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweet Baby Girl</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tomato Type</th>
<th>Variety</th>
<th>Pollination Type</th>
<th>Growth Habit</th>
<th>Color</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tomato Toe</strong></td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
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<td><strong>Pear</strong></td>
<td>Evan’s Purple Pear</td>
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<td>Purple/Black</td>
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<td><strong>Pear</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Plum/Medium</strong></td>
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<td>Striped green and yellow</td>
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<td>Anahu</td>
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<td>Red</td>
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<td><strong>Slicing/Globe</strong></td>
<td>Garden Gem</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Slicing/Globe</strong></td>
<td>Garden Treasure</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Red</td>
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<td><strong>Slicing/Globe</strong></td>
<td>Healani</td>
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<td>Semi-determinate</td>
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<td><strong>Slicing/Globe</strong></td>
<td>Nineveh</td>
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<td>Red</td>
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<td><strong>Slicing/Globe</strong></td>
<td>Pink Berkeley Tie Dye</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
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<td>Red/Green Stripes</td>
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<td><strong>Slicing/Globe</strong></td>
<td>Rutgers</td>
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<td>Semi-determinate</td>
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**Stuffer/Beefsteak**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Type</th>
<th>Determinate</th>
<th>Color</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Black Krim</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Black/Purple/Red</td>
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<td>Cherokee Purple</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Black</td>
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<td>Chocolate Stripes</td>
<td>Open-Pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Brown/Green shoulders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delicious</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiwi</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortgage Lifter</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Big Dwarf</td>
<td>Open-pollinated</td>
<td>Dwarf</td>
<td>Pink</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>