

Tomatoes are one of the most popular vegetables in the United States, second only to potatoes. Although this is partially thanks to ketchup, garden fresh tomatoes have a special place in many of our hearts. When purchasing tomato plants, labeling can often raise more questions than it answers. What is an indeterminate tomato? Are grafted tomatoes worth the expense? Hybrid or heirloom?

“Indeterminate”: A plant with this label will grow continually throughout the season, reaching heights of 4-6’ tall. This height requires the gardener to stake the plant as it grows. The side branch will produce blooms and set fruit. The result is a plant loaded with tomatoes. Although plentiful fruit sounds wonderful, as the season progresses these tomatoes are often small.

Indeterminate Variety Examples: Beefmaster, Beefy Boy, Big Beef, Cherokee Purple, Early Girl, Jet Star, SunSugar, Golden Rave, Italian Gold, Super Italian Paste, Plum Dandy, Super Marzano, Esterina, Juliet, Suncherry, Supersweet 100, Chef’s Choice, Jetsetter, Amanda Orange, Black Krim, Mortgage Lifter.

“Determinate”: This plant will produce a limited number of side branches, bloom all at once and produce an abundance of fruit in a short timeframe, with similarly sized fruit throughout.

Determinate Variety Examples: Amelia, Bush Early Girl, Crista, Roma, Florida 91, Mountain Series, Margherita, BHN 871, Sweet Tangerine, Little Napoli, Plum Crimson, Tumbling Tom, Sweet Olive, Carolina Gold, Florida 47, Primo Red, Scarlet Red.

“Grafted”: Grafted tomato plants are an attempt to fight off soil borne diseases like fusarium and verticillium wilt. This is done by combining a disease resistant tomato root system (rootstock) with the desired tomato fruit on top (scion). These plants are wonderful for gardeners who don’t have the space to rotate their tomato plants as these diseases can persist in the soil for 10-15 years. Due to high input costs for this method, grafted plants are very expensive. Grafted plants are not resistant to foliar (leaf) diseases. Whether a grafted plant is worth the cost is a determination each gardener must make.

Grafted Variety Examples: Numerous graft combinations are possible. If you’ve experienced soil-based diseases in your garden, and cannot plant in a new location, grafted plants may be a good choice, even with the increased cost.

“Hybrid”: Hybrid plants have been carefully cross-bred to produce desirable traits. Often these traits are disease resistance, but hybrid tomatoes have also been bred to taste better and some are bred to be more nutritious! The process of cross-breeding takes years of research and work. Once a hybrid variety is established it is very consistent, what you buy is what you get. Hybrid varieties can be determinate/indeterminate/semi-determinate or grafted but they cannot also be heirloom. Unlike heirloom plants, if you save hybrid seeds, the resulting plants may not have the same desirable characteristics.

Hybrid Variety Examples: Little Napoli, Plum Crimson, Plum Dandy, Pony Express, Margherita, Super Marzano, Esterina, Juliet, Mountain Belle, Sun Gold, Suncherry, SunSugar, Supersweet, Tumbling Tom, Sweet Olive, Amelia, Beefy Boy, Big Beef, Carolina Gold, Celebrity, Chef’s Choice, Floralina, Florida 47, Florida 91, Jetsetter, Jet Star, Mountain Fresh Plus, Mountain Spring, Primo Red, Scarlet Red, Sun Leaper, Sunmaster.

“Heirloom”: The definition of heirloom varieties is debated amongst many gardeners. For most, it means varieties of tomatoes that were around prior to 1950, since hybrid varieties made an appearance in 1951. Essentially, these varieties are all old. These plants are open-pollinated, meaning they are

pollinated by insects or the wind. This pollination method means you can save seeds that will grow true to their parents, unlike hybrid varieties.

Heirloom Variety Examples: Roma, Amanda Orange, Black Krim, Cherokee Purple, Mortgage Lifter, Italian Gold, Martino's Roma, Super Italian Paste, Chocolate Cherry.

To address the final, and quite possibly most debated tomato question, is the tomato a fruit or a vegetable? The answer is both. Botanically, when you're looking at plant parts, the tomato is the fruit of the plant. It is the seed-bearing structure of a flower-bearing plant. Cucumbers and squash would also be fruit by this definition. So what is a vegetable, botanically speaking? A vegetable botanically is considered the other parts of the plant. So when you eat celery or rhubarb, you're eating the stem of the plant. When you eat lettuce and spinach you're eating the leaves and broccoli and cauliflower are developing flowers. So if botanically tomatoes are fruit, why classify them as a vegetable? Fruit in horticulture terms is considered those plant parts typically eaten for breakfast or for dessert, while vegetables are eaten with lunch or dinner. To clear up the confusion, in 1893 the tomato was classified by the United States Supreme Court as a vegetable. This judgement was made for tariff purposes, but despite the ruling the debate continues today!