

More about winter tomatoes

One of the most convincing demonstrations of climate change has been the transition of tomatoes over the last 50 years from a summer vegetable to a crop that we can harvest through the entire twelve months. We watched the plants grown from seed planted in June surviving into November, then December, and occasionally though to early March. By that time the plants looked pretty raddled and the fruit was misshapen but still flavourful.

For the past several years we have deliberately planted seed for a winter harvest. On Christmas day I picked fruit from plants started from seed on June 9 and August 6, and I have healthy plants started September 17 beginning to set fruit. We have found Celebrity the best variety for a winter harvest. It's a hardy and excellent-tasting variety but its most important characteristic is its disease resistance. In our small and intensively planted garden it's not possible to do proper crop rotation of the Solanaceae when we're making perhaps six plantings a year of tomatoes and also growing peppers and eggplants. During the summer, even Celebrity survives for only four months or so. In the cold weather disease is much less of a problem and we've had late-started plants last for the better part of a year. This year I thought I'd try an heirloom variety, the delicious Yellow Brandywine, which we've not been able to grow for many years. In late December the plants started September 6 are looking very healthy but the fruit isn't setting. I'm hopeful that they'll do better when the nights get a bit warmer.

We do see a lot of mildew on the winter plants. It occurs mostly on the bottom leaves and where the leaves are crowded. One plant that was nearly defoliated by the hornworms in September now looks very healthy, its small new leaves well separated and exposed to the sunlight and winter breeze.

The winter fruit tastes as good, or perhaps even better than what we harvest in the summer. The skin is a bit tougher and is subject to circumferential and radial cracking at the stem end. That doesn't affect the taste but would make it unmarketable for the commercial grower. It seems that the cracking is caused by temperature fluctuations. The fruit expands with the warmth of the day, overwhelming the ability of the epidermis to stretch.

We haven't made any special effort to protect the plants from frost during cold nights and haven't seen evidence of damage, even during the dozen or so nights in a typical winter when the temperature drops into the high 30s. It's been at least five years since we've seen freezing temperatures but if we do have a real cold snap it should suffice to throw some row cover over the plants.