

# TINY TASTE BOMBS

Never have gardeners had such a range of colour, size and flavour of tomatoes to choose from. **Ian Hodgson** grew many of the more diminutive cultivars, and put them to the taste test. Photography by Tim Sandall

**IT'S ONLY WHEN YOU** take the opportunity to grow a wide range of tomatoes that you really appreciate the diversity of shapes, flavours, colours and textures now available. In recent years cherry tomatoes have become a darling of supermarkets, particularly when sold 'on the vine'. So-called currant tomatoes, with pea-sized fruits, are less well-known but becoming better appreciated.

Last year I grew more than 20 new and vintage cherry and currant cultivars in growing bags, all squeezed into two glasshouses – one 3 x 3.6m (10 x 12ft), the other 1.8 x 2.4m (6 x 8ft). Besides sampling the rich diversity of different cultivars, I wanted to see how plants performed in the widening range of reduced-peat and peat-free growing bags on the market, while trying grafted tomato plants new to home gardeners (for more on grafted stock, see p271).

Growing under glass avoided the effects of late blight, the bane of potatoes and tomatoes grown outside, and was an insurance against the vagaries of indifferent British summers. The additional heat and protection under glass increased productivity, boosted flavour and extended cropping until late October.

## Getting started

Tomatoes can be broadly divided into two types according to their growth habit: determinate (bush type) and indeterminate (cordon or vine type). Determinate cultivars produce a lot of side shoots from the main stem, which

rapidly becomes a sheaf of shoots with no obvious leader. Of those I grew, 'Orange Pixie' <sup>19</sup>, 'Polar Baby' <sup>12</sup> and 'Green Grape' <sup>14</sup>.

Indeterminate type tomatoes have one main leader which needs to be secured to a freestanding framework, wire or cane. Indoors these can be secured to the roof trusses and superstructure of a glasshouse. The central stem of cordon cultivars produce sideshoots from leaf axils, which should be removed when small to keep growth under control and prevent plants from sprawling.

Cordon types need supports strong enough to take the weight of mature plants fully laden with fruit. If growing a number of plants, it is best to secure heavy-duty galvanised wire running the length of the glasshouse, secured to cross members from which vertical strings or bamboo canes can be strung (for more on raising plants, see p270).

It is essential to know the habit of your tomato as this will inform how to grow and train them. Vine types need to be grown from the floor of the glasshouse, but smaller bush types such as 'Green Grape' could be grown in growing bags on robust benches. Smaller determinates such as 'Orange Pixie' and 'Polar Baby' can even be grown in pots or hanging baskets. Growing bags are perhaps the most convenient method, but tomatoes can also succeed in 38–45cm (15–18in) pots, traditional 'ring culture' systems or internal glasshouse borders. ▶



## TEENY TOMS

Boxed numbers in the text refer to these tomato cultivars:

- 1 'Blondekopfchen' (cordon)
- 2 'Riesentraube' (cordon)
- 3 'Ildi' (cordon)
- 4 'Striadel' (cordon)
- 5 'Sunburst' (cordon)
- 6 'Goldrush Currant' (cordon)
- 7 'Conchita' (cordon, grafted)
- 8 'Santorange' (cordon, grafted)
- 9 'Yellow Butterfly' (cordon)
- 10 'Sweet Pea Currant' (cordon)
- 11 'Brown Berry' (cordon)
- 12 'Polar Baby' (bush)
- 13 'Piccolo' (cordon)
- 14 'Green Grape' (bush)
- 15 'Tonadose des Conores' (cordon)
- 16 'Mexico Midget' (cordon)
- 17 'Egg Yolk' (cordon)
- 18 'Dasher' (cordon, grafted)
- 19 'Orange Pixie' (dwarf bush)



# GETTING STARTED WITH TOMATOES

Tomatoes are easy to raise from seed and this gives a wide choice of cultivars (see also p283). Some heritage types are slower or more erratic to germinate, but none of the cultivars I grew failed to grow. Many seed companies and garden centres offer ready-grown plug plants by mail order or direct purchase, but the choice is more limited. Grafted plants (see box, opposite), a revival of an old technique must be ordered from suppliers (see information panel, p271).

Deciding on which growing media to use is a matter of personal choice, but gardeners are being encouraged to use reduced-peat and peat-free media. I used both and although not an exhaustive test, all the cultivars fared well in both reduced peat (Westland West Plus) and peat-free (J Arthur Bower's New Horizon). For ease of use I preferred Westland's West Plus, a mix of 50 percent peat and 50 percent wood fibre. It had better structure and did not compact with watering as the peat-free types can (which in turn let water run off the growing bag). The colour of the wood fibre signalled when the bag was drying out, and it was easier to re-wet.



**1** Throughout March and April sow seed thinly and evenly in 7.5cm (3in) pots or modules in peat-reduced or peat-free seed compost. Lightly cover with sieved compost, water-in and maintain a minimum temperature of 21°C (70°F). When seedlings are large enough to handle, transplant into individual modules.



**2** As seedling leaves start to overlap or roots become congested, pot on into 10–13cm (4–5in pots). Space pots 15–20cm (6–8in) apart to give plants room to grow. Weak-growing types may need staking. Roots appearing at the sides of the compost indicates time to transplant young plants to their final positions.



**3** Larger growing bags have spaces for three plants. Support plants with waxed twine, canes or plastic string. Loosen the base of the rootball to fit the plant in the growing bag, firm and water-in. Keep plants moist, maintain a minimum 18°C (64°F) and avoid sudden changes in temperature during establishment.



**4** As plants grow, gently twist stems around the strings. Tie in as necessary. Cordon types need side shoots to be removed constantly to keep them under control; gently snap off or twist them out. Feed plants regularly. From midsummer onwards, remove leaves below ripened trusses, especially if plants are crowded.

## GRAFTED PLANTS

Originally a commercial growing technique, grafted tomato plants are now offered by Suttons and Dobies. The top growth (scion) of a young tomato cultivar is spliced onto a rootstock bred from a wild species, *Solanum pimpinellifolium*. This has been selected for vigour, resistance to root diseases and ability to perform in lower temperatures, and less-than-ideal growing media. Grafted plants (such as 'Conchita' and 'Santorange', above) are said to be more vigorous, faster to establish, able to cope with lower temperatures early in the year, and crop for longer. Grafting does not protect against blight and other aerially-transmitted pests or diseases. The graft must stay above soil level.



### Routine care

Once established, tomato plants respond well to rising temperatures, growing rapidly and as a result, will need securing to supports every few days. Once the first flowers have set and started to swell, feed with a proprietary high potash tomato fertiliser (as instructed by the manufacturer). When plants are in full production, feed two to three times a week. Keep plant roots moist, but not wet and damp down the floor to maintain humidity. Ventilate when temperatures rise above 25°C (77°F).

As well as selection of cultivar, success with tomatoes comes down to consistently managing the watering, feeding, training and trimming of plants. The biggest factors affecting flavour and performance are the characteristics of the cultivar itself and the availability of sunlight. Light is pivotal: generally, a greater amount of

sunlight means higher sugar content for fruit, and as a result, better flavour. Fruit consistently shaded by foliage is often insipid in comparison to those on the same plant receiving full sun.

Flavour is also affected by watering and feeding: over-bloated fruit tend to have less flavour than those which are slightly droughted. Heritage types may have been selected or developed in warmer climes, such as the southern USA or Mediterranean, so may not perform quite so well in a poor British summer, even under glass. If growing intensively, particularly leafier cultivars, trim off leaves below ripened fruit trusses and plants shouldn't suffer unduly.

Under glass, red spider mite is the biggest scourge and it pays to check the undersides of foliage for the telltale specking caused by feeding mites. Spot treat with insecticides based on plant oils or fatty acids, and remove badly affected foliage to help prevent further spread. A biological control is available (predatory mite *Phytoseiulus persimilis*) which can be really effective if introduced early. Spider mites like it hot and dry so keeping the humidity high helps check their spread.

Smaller-fruited tomatoes are not as prone to physiological fruit problems as, for example, beefsteak and plum tomatoes – blossom end rot creates corky patches appearing at the end of fruits. Many do split however but those with thicker skins are more resistant; this is usually caused by inconsistent growing conditions, especially watering when plants are allowed to dry out and re-wetted, or if temperatures fluctuate. Over-ripe fruit splits more easily as the skins start to thin, so harvest regularly.

### Performance and taste

In general, all the tomatoes I tried grew well and produced fair to good crops of fruit. As you might expect with such a mixed bag of cultivars, productivity, taste and texture varied. Some were obvious candidates for salads, others may be better in casseroles or stir-fries, garnishing meat or sprinkled on pizzas. Some were blessed with many desirable traits gardeners seek: reliability of performance balanced with a tangy tomato taste, and a melt-in-the-mouth texture only home-grown fruit gives.

So which performed best? Taste is subjective, but for me 'Piccolo' **13**,

'Striadel' **4** and 'Sunburst' **5** were the best for both flavour and productivity. 'Piccolo' in particular had a real tangy tomato flavour that lingered. Fruits were firm, but the skins were not tough, and productivity was good with an average 12 fruits per truss. 'Sunburst' was sweeter and 'Striadel', similar in fruiting to ever-popular 'Gardener's Delight', had attractive yellow stripes.

The most unusual flavour and texture was 'Brown Berry' **11**. Unconventional in colour, freshly picked fruit had a pleasing flavour, not zesty but soft and not too sweet. The texture was distinctive, melting in the mouth but not particularly juicy; it wasn't unpleasant, just different. It grew prolifically, with large, heavy trusses of mahogany-tinted fruits. 'Green Grape' **14** (pictured far left) is another unusual colour: released in the USA in 1986, it produced copious yellow-green fruits that, although looking slightly unripe, surprised with their tangy, yet semi-sweet flavour. It was my favourite green-fruited cultivar.

The most productive cultivar was 'Ildi' **3**. Massive trusses of small, yellow teardrops were produced all summer and into autumn. Fruit were sweet,

long lasting, did not split or deteriorate and were ideal in salads, stir-fries or as a quick snack. Trusses were ideal as a table decoration, a great alternative to grapes for guests to help themselves to.

The currant types were not so satisfying a snack, but each tiny 'berry' surprised the taste buds with a zesty zing of tomato. Downsides were the weak-growing and leafy nature of plants, which needed careful support, training and trimming of the spindly shoots. Fruits had tough skins, but would be ideal sprinkled on pizzas or lightly cooked in pasta.

### Grafting for success

I tried three grafted, small-fruited cultivars: two small, plum-types, 'Santorange' **8** and 'Dasher' **18**, and 'Conchita' **7**, a large cherry-type with long fruit trusses. Dobies offers both 'Santorange' and 'Dasher' grafted onto one rootstock. Compared to seed-grown plants, grafted plants established and grew away more quickly, and started cropping a couple of weeks earlier (see box, above right). Out of these three plants, 'Dasher' proved to have the sweetest and tastiest fruits.

If there were any I would not grow again, it would be 'Mexico Midget' **16** – sparse trusses of small fruit that tasted unremarkable. But with so much choice available, growing tomatoes has never been so exciting. Whether your passion is for heritage, traditional or modern selections, there is a smaller tomato to suit your needs. But be warned: they are also strangely addictive and before you know it, you'll be lured into trying a few more forbidden fruits. ■

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**i Growing tomatoes** For more on what type of plant to grow, see p283. ● There is plenty of tomato-growing information online: [www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown](http://www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown)

**i Suppliers include** (S – seed; P – young plants; G – grafted plants): Dobies: 0844 701 7623; [www.dobies.co.uk](http://www.dobies.co.uk) (S, P, G) Plant World Seeds: 01803 872939; [www.plant-world-seeds.com](http://www.plant-world-seeds.com) (S) Simpson's Seeds: 01985 845004; [www.simpsonseeds.co.uk](http://www.simpsonseeds.co.uk) (S, P) Suttons Seeds: 0844 922 0606; [www.suttons.co.uk](http://www.suttons.co.uk) (S, P, G) Thompson & Morgan: 0844 248 5383; [www.thompson-morgan.com](http://www.thompson-morgan.com) (S, P)

