

## Does a Gardener Ever Retire?

Last year I was advised, and thought it prudent, to relinquish serious gardening, give up my allotment and become a senior citizen at 82. But how do you retire from gardening? How can you never again feel the joy of having soil in your hands?

So I decided to change tack and undertake something new and, perhaps, not so strenuous. Perhaps! My project was to undertake a research study in growing 'heritage tomatoes'.

With some good fortune I found a 'guru' for my venture – Craig Le Houllier – an American grower, passionate about tomatoes, especially historical varieties. I purchased his admirable book *'Epic Tomatoes'* second-hand on the internet and could not put it down. I bought my seeds from Plant World Nursery at Newton Abbot who have an extensive catalogue of heritage seeds.

After germinating seeds in the conservatory in February I potted them on in an unheated greenhouse in March and planted the hardier varieties outside in zip-up plastic containers. The rest I planted in the greenhouse. I never lost one plant either to disease or to weather. Altogether I grew 37 varieties and at the end rated them on taste, weather, disease-resistance and yield. Friends and relatives helped evaluate taste – which they enjoyed!

My varieties included Nyagous (Russian); Russian Black; and Black Russian (two distinct varieties); Stupice (Czech); Prize of the Trials (USA); Red Dwarf (Romanian) - small delicious pear shaped fruits that went on for ever; Sioux - an old favourite American variety developed by the University of Nebraska; along with Indian Moon bred by the Navajo Indians.

Other interesting seeds were Paul Robeson; Tim's Black Ruffles; Green Agate from China; Tlacolula from Mexico; Tommy Toe from the Ozark Mountains America; and the superb Ludmilla's Pink Heart. This variety was brought by Ludmilla, a Kazakstan German, who gave the unknown seeds from her native country to her friend Reinhardt Kraft Neukirchen. He grew them on successfully and must have been a romantic as he named them Ludmilla's Pink Heart.

Fortunately I am an early riser as, because of the very warm summer in 2019, it was necessary to water twice a day. I did so much enjoy the tranquillity, personal space and the birdsong of the early morning but it was hard work watering by hand using rainwater. I admit being ready for a short nap by mid-morning!

Besides the Heritage tomatoes I grew Sungold and grafted Shirley varieties. Sungold was for the others to match for sweetness, as I think it is unbeatable; and none of them did. But how could it have the charisma of Ludmilla's Pink Heart, or its story?

Yields varied, as did taste and appearance but I was able to ascertain which varieties I would grow again or recommend.

Space precludes me from mentioning too many but the Czechoslovakian Stupice did very well, it was weather and disease resistant with good yield and taste. The tomato got sweeter as the season progressed.

Russian Black from the Ukraine was sweet with a pleasant salty taste and is thought to be the best and most desired of 'black' tomatoes.

I really liked Nyagous, a rare Russian variety which has a smoky-salty taste.

It was unfortunate that the Romanian Red Dwarf variety was growing in our conservatory. It was prolific, producing an abundance of pear-drop sized sweet fruits. Every time I walked into the conservatory the tomatoes disappeared! The grower's perk – and why not?

Last year was to have been my swan-song with gardening and I was quite ill over Christmas, but when the sun came out after our miserable winter and I got my hands in the soil, guess what? I had the good fortune to recently receive ten seeds of a Syrian heritage tomato brought out of Aleppo just before the civil war started. Three seeds germinated and produced plants. While I think of my good fortune I also think of all the unfortunate Syrian refugees who no longer have a homeland, a home, or a garden. Maybe some of them took seeds of this tomato with them in to exile and hopefully this will give them hope of returning to plant them once again in their gardens. I look forward to growing this tomato and when it flourishes I shall think of them.

**David Downton**

# Some of my Heritage Tomatoes



Black Russian Heritage Tomato



Heirloom Ludmillas Pink Heart



Nyagods - Rare Russian variety great flavour



Heritage tomato - Cherokee Orange from Tennessee pre 1890 passed down by the Cherokee Indians



Stupice Heritage Czechoslovakian



Tigrella - Old English greenhouse variety

