



Iowa Gardening

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The Ironic History of the Love Apple

The great variety of the Hamiltons' heirloom tomatoes survived a history of misunderstanding. Ben Franklin didn't think tomatoes were safe to eat, while less open-minded Colonial Americans thought they were poisonous, and even evil.

The tomato did not become a popular food in Northern Europe, England, or Anglo-Saxon America until the twentieth century. Coincidentally or not, this is also when tomato ketchup and tomato soup in tin cans and caught on in England and America.

In appreciation of the tomato, northern Europe and North America were centuries behind Spain and Italy, and millennia behind Central and South America.

The tomato developed first in Mexico as a cornfield weed, but was soon cultivated as a food. By 3500 BC, it was part of the native diet and by the time Cortez came to Mexico, the Aztecs were using tomatoes at all stages of growth. Immature fruits were sliced into salads and ripe plants were cooked with chilies into sauce for beans.

We stereotype the ripe tomato as red and round today, but the varieties that first came to Europe were surely yellow or orange, for they were called "golden apples" (pomodoro). The French name "love apple" (pomme d'amour) was either a corruption of that Spanish word, or of the Italian pomme di moro ("apple of the Moor"). The Spanish, better informed about tomato sources, began calling them tomate, after the Nahuatl word tomatl. Even in the late nineteenth century, northern Europeans wrote that the tomato was totally without nutrition and a cause of gout.

—Jim Duncan