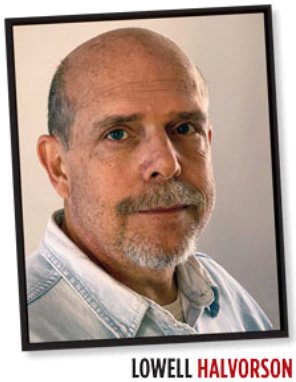
GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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Exploring the Dwarf Tomato

Lowell Halvorson



For hanging baskets, Red Profusion is excellent, and the people at Prudac have bred many different sizes and colors for container and decor work. There's also an intriguing sub-genre of micro-tomatoes like the ones found at Kitchen Minis—but we're not going to talk about any of those today.

No, we're chatting about full-sized fruit grown from half-sized plants, big tomatoes with a compact habit. Now, dwarf tomatoes aren't determinates like the Roma or San Marzano. Those tomatoes do grow in a short, bushy style, but they also flush out in a single big harvest. Once spent, the plant gives up for the season.

Honey, I shrunk the tomato (plant)

Dwarf tomatoes are true indeterminates—they just grow very slowly due to a genetic mutation. Side-by-side, if a standard indeterminate grew a 10-ft. vine in three months, a typical dwarf would grow only 5 ft. Theoretically, a dwarf in a hothouse could grow to 10 ft., but the standard vine would be maybe 30 ft. by that time.

That's the trick this mutation plays. It pulls back on vine growth and reinvests the sugars into building fruit. Several retailers who sell dwarf tomatoes have noticed subtle-but-important differences in the plants themselves: sturdier stems that need less staking, a thicker canopy that gathers more sunshine and larger leaves than usual with a deeper green in them. Dwarf tomatoes don't grow less biomass overall, they just don't grow such long vines.

In the meantime, they keep all the benefits of an indeterminate tomato, continuously flowering and fruiting until frost. The taste is richer and more complex because the vine has time to build a better fruit.

Dwarf tomatoes have caught the eye of enthusiasts for obvious reasons. Real tomatoes—tasty tomatoes—can be grown on half the real estate. It follows the major American housing trend of big house/small yard, the incredibly shrinking suburban plot and the shift to container gardens.

The Dwarf Tomato Project

A citizen scientist crowd-breeding effort run by Craig LeHoullier is the dwarf tomato's heartbeat. Named the Dwarf Tomato Project, the team focuses on a genetic mutation of indeterminates that slows the rate of vine growth, then shepherds it through the various heirlooms to keep the complex flavors. Varieties are stabilized across eight-plus generations before they're named and released for sale.

The breeding styles tend to run down one of two tracks. First are the classics:

- Eagle Smiley—A sweet yellow cherry, but compact (5-ft. vines)
- Hannah's Prize—The classic salad, sized for a deck garden (5- to 6-ft. vines)
- Boronia—Cherokee Purple, but smaller (3- to 4-ft. vines)

But look at the iconoclasts:

- Fred's Tie Dye—A tiger stripe beefsteak (6-ft. vines)
- Audrey's Love—A tiger stripe paste (2- to 3-ft. vines)
- Snakebite—A very tangy tomato (3- to 4-ft. vines)
- Awesome—Yellow with a slight blush inside (5- to 6-ft. vines)
- Stony Brook—Oxheart with flecked stripes of gold (potato leaf, 3- to 4-ft. vines)
- Sneaky Sauce—A mega-paste tomato (5- to 6-ft. vines)
- Sleeping Lady—A tomato that ripens in Alaska (3-ft. vines)
- Saucy Mary—Green and yellow variegated plum (5- to 6-ft. vines)

Or maybe Uluru Ochre (black/orange fruit with a smokey flavor) or BrandyFred (purple flesh) or—I kid you not—a tomato called Metallica (pink fruits with green metallic stripes). These are passionate tomatoes that someone wanted to develop. After the core goals of the project are met, focus seems to be governed by imagination. Tomatoes become what the individual breeders want them to be.



Commercial uses

You're free to sell these seeds to your heart's content without royalties. Several companies sell dwarf tomatoes to the home garden market, particularly those specializing in open-pollinated or heirloom varieties. One company that also handles commercial orders is Victory Seed Company in Roanoke, Texas, operated by the Whitinger family. Their website includes a section dedicated to dwarf tomatoes, with photos that provide a good sense of the fruit and plant characteristics. Be sure to read the customer comments, as well—gardeners frequently praise the varieties for their compact growth habit and high yields.

Left: Audrey's Love is a small plant, growing only 2- to 3-ft. tall. The fruit is consider a chocolate-style tomato (red with green shoulders), weighs about 2 to 4 oz. and dries in a style similar to a Roma. The variety is named after the breeder's mother.

Not every variety is available in bulk quantities, but the shopping cart clearly indicates which ones can be ordered by weight (ounces or pounds) through the Choose Options button. Timing matters, because Victory doesn't take pre-orders. They ship right after the order is booked, as long as the product is in stock. What you see is what they have at the moment.

Victory strongly prefers initial contact through the form on their website, but they respond quickly via email. Provide an estimate of your order size and they can suggest varieties that are available in sufficient quantities. If you go this route, address the request to Jon Whitinger.

What qualifies as a bulk order does depend on your operation. A progressive finishing nursery could round out its

collection of eclectic tomato varieties for a major metro area. A grower-retailer could easily supply a five-store chain with distinctive, eye-catching tomatoes in meaningful volume. A vegetable promoter could build unique tomato events by digging into the wacky wonderfulness. The crop remains the signature vegetable that draws customers into the garden center.

Also, many tomato growers are probably passionate about the topic. Some may even be interested in developing their own vision of the ideal tomato. The Dwarf Tomato Project offers an outlet for that kind of creativity and collaboration, with the potential to advance tomato breeding and perhaps even produce commercially viable new varieties.

Licensing restrictions do apply if you breed tomatoes commercially. You're allowed to sell the derivatives, but you cannot deny that right to others, following the guidelines stated by OSSI. Interested growers or breeders can contact Craig LeHoullier through the Dwarf Tomato Project. **GT**

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