

PART OF MY GROWING INTEREST in home gardening can be traced to a remark from a Food4Less cashier.

"That's a lot of potatoes," she said, heaving a large bag of them across the scanner. "I guess it's a good thing they grow on trees."

We shared a laugh, for very different reasons. But it got me thinking. Why not just go ahead and think that potatoes grow on trees? Or on Mars for that matter. After all, simply knowing where potatoes (or tomatoes or lettuce or avocados) come from — a *vine*, the *ground*, a *test tube* — didn't make me feel the least bit more connected to any of this food I was grabbing out of one bin and dumping into another until it was either eaten like an afterthought or thrown away. Something hit me. I was too many miles away from the nearest potato tree.

I started checking into seeds. First, a cheap pack of zucchini beside the drill bits at the hardware store down the street. Then farther afield (Kmart) — and finally online, where an amazing number of seed sellers were offering 100 kinds of open-pollinated melons, 500 different heirloom tomatoes, Atomic Red carrots, Viking Purple potatoes, Flying Saucer squash. The list went on. All this remarkable food I never knew existed — but which had, in many cases, been around for centuries longer than Food4Less.

Potato trees aside, you'll be truly amazed at what you can grow. What follows is a colorful, shapely, luscious crop of appetizers.

TOMATOES

GROWING INSTRUCTIONS: Warm-season crop, very sensitive to frost and light freezes. Sow seeds indoors six to eight weeks. Transplant outside at least two weeks after the last frost when soil temperatures are at least 60 F.

Maybe you've grown tomatoes at some point (or considered it, or once watered your uncle's). Maybe you remember how they tasted — alive with flavors those supermarket rubber balls never hinted at. When people think of a vegetable garden, tomatoes (yeah, we know, technically a fruit) almost always spring to mind. That's because "93 percent of people who have gardens in America grow tomatoes," says Gary Ibsen, a California-based organic heirloom tomato grower and founder of Carmel TomatoFest (pretty much the Oscars for tomatoes). Not to say that 92 percent of people couldn't be growing far more interesting ones. "Most are trained to get the same old variety they've been getting for years," Ibsen says. "But we're seeing a shift now, especially as people get exposed to more and more heirlooms on the market." Despite the fact that about a third of these open-pollinated varieties passed down through generations have been lost over the last 30 years, you won't run out of choices anytime soon. Ibsen alone grows 500 kinds of certified organic heirloom tomatoes — strikingly different kinds.

WHAT'S HOT? Not packets of mass-produced hybrids sold in chain stores — still the most commonly bought seeds. Ibsen's favorites sound, look, and no doubt taste unlike any of them. Bestsellers include Brandywine, a 19th-century, Amish variety that has risen to cult status among chefs for its light, creamy flesh and exceptionally rich flavor. The majestic, Russian-borne (and -named — by Soviet fans of the great American vocalist/activist) Paul Robeson is a dark, earthy, red beefsteak tomato and recent TomatoFest "Best of Show." The eye-catching Green Zebra is a 2-inch orb of yellow-gold with emerald stripes and a refreshing lemon-lime flavor. A giant, pink, heart-shaped heirloom from Russia called Sunset's Red Horizon is the latest heart-throb for tomato aficionados, especially on the West Coast. "It does great in coastal climates," Ibsen says.

TWO DOS AND ONE DON'T "Tomatoes are pretty hardy," Ibsen says. "They'll find a crack in concrete and grow right through it if you let them." That said, he adds, this isn't the best way to grow tomatoes, which can actually be quite sensitive, too. Do: Germinate indoors for the first six to eight weeks before transplanting in the garden (at least two weeks after the last frost). Do: Invest in a white fluorescent light for seedlings and shine it a few inches above the young plant for 12 hours a day (windowsill light isn't as reliable). Don't: Overwater or underwater; uneven moisture causes cracking or, worse, blossom end rot.

FALSE! Tomatoes are red and round with rubbery skin and a waxy finish. They're best left in the fridge for a week until dark spots develop and the skin shrivels.

