



ago when European colonists first brought tomatoes to America. At that time, tomatoes were widely considered to be poisonous and even morally objectionable—Puritans regarded them as a “forbidden fruit.” But in the intervening years, tomatoes have gradually emerged as an integral part of American cuisine and culture. In addition to becoming a valuable commercial crop and a favorite of backyard gardeners, they are now touted, ironically, for their health benefits as rich sources of antioxidants as well as vitamins A and C.

EARLY HISTORY

The ancestral wild tomato (*Lycopersicon esculentum*) bears little resemblance in appearance or taste to the ones we grow today. Native to the Andes mountains and coastal highlands of South and Central America, the wild tomato plant is scrawny and yields clusters of small, undistinguished green fruits.

The Aztecs and other indigenous peoples, nevertheless, recognized their culinary potential and passed this knowledge along to the Spanish conquistadors who arrived in South America in the early 16th century. Seeds taken back to Europe flourished in the Mediterranean climate and the tomato quickly became integrated into the cuisine of countries such as Spain and Italy.

Not so in England, however, where tomatoes continued for some time to be viewed with suspicion because of misguided assumptions about their family ties with deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*) and other plants in the nightshade family (Solanaceae).

The tomato’s botanical name seems to reflect this ambiguity about the plant; the genus name, *Lycopersicon*, translates to the ominous sounding “wolf peach.” while

the species name, *esculentum*, means edible. As it turns out, the tomato fruits are perfectly edible, but the leaves and stems contain toxic alkaloids that can cause digestive problems.

Ambivalence about tomatoes spread to North America in the 17th century. As Karan Davis Cutler wrote in *Tantalizing Tomatoes*, “The early American colonists, English to the core, not only brought

FRUIT OR VEGETABLE?

Not too many plants have found themselves the subject of debate in the U.S. Supreme Court, but it’s a testament to the importance of the tomato that these vegetables... uh... fruits were at the center of a high court decision in 1887. The case pitted U.S. farmers against tomato importers; the stakes, whether tomatoes were vegetables and thus subject to import taxes. The arguments of farm lobbyists swayed the court’s decision, which established that for tax purposes tomatoes were to be officially considered vegetables even though botanically they matched the technical definition of fruits—specialized reproductive structures that contain seeds.

Tomatoes with a past: Heirloom varieties that were once grown in American gardens and are now being “rediscovered” include ‘Aunt Ruby’s German Green’, top left, ‘Cherokee Purple’, top right, and ‘Old German’, left.

tomatoes back to this continent, but also imported all the popular prejudices about them.”

THE GREAT TOMATO MANIA

Gradually—and sometimes grudgingly—American perceptions about tomatoes changed. It helped when scientific gardeners such as Thomas Jefferson started growing tomatoes in the late 1700s and American seed companies began carrying tomato seeds in their catalogs.

Many historians cite the turning point for the tomato in America as 1820, when Robert Johnson, an eccentric resident of Salem, New Jersey, was reported to have made a very public spectacle of eating a bushel of tomatoes on the steps of the Salem Courthouse. But Andrew F. Smith, author of *The Tomato in America*, regards this colorful story as apocryphal.

Whether or not the Johnson incident really happened, tomatoes reached a peak of popularity in America in the 1820s during “The Great Tomato Mania,” which Smith describes as a period of “national tomato obsession.” From near obscurity, the tomato suddenly became a household name. Tomato recipes appeared as if out of nowhere in magazines, newspapers, agricultural periodicals, horticultural works, and medical journals.

By the 1830s, Americans could not get enough of tomatoes, not only for eating, but for a variety of other attributes. Among other things, the tomato became valued, says Smith, for its use as a “beau-