

# Why supermarket tomatoes come last in every taste test!

*Clive Blazey asks why Tommy Toe and 17 heirloom tomatoes beat supermarket hybrids*



Clive Blazey  
Diggers Founder &  
Executive Chairman

Since we did our famous tomato taste test twenty years ago at Heronswood with top chefs (including Stephanie Alexander), garden writers and seed merchants, we have found two explanations for the complete dominance of heirloom garden varieties over supermarket hybrids.

1. According to US food authorities the modern tomato has the highest dissatisfaction rating of any supermarket item. With these same supermarket hybrids offered in Australia we can be sure it applies in Australia too. Breeding for shelf life always supersedes flavour.
2. Considering that modern plant breeders have integrated a slow ripening gene into the supermarket hybrids, the fruit can never develop sugars and ripen but the fruit still looks red, shiny and impressive – like an ageless celebrity film star.



Tomato taste test,  
Adelaide Botanic Garden,  
February 2013

We decided it was time to repeat the taste test so we invited South Australian garden experts to join ten cooks and gardeners to a taste test in the Adelaide Botanic Garden in February 2013.

## *The Results – Italian Chefs*

We had three Italian chef/food experts who rated Italian red heirloom *Periforme* the best, in preference to highly coloured heirlooms.

## *The Results – Garden Gurus*

Adelaide radio garden hosts Michael Keelan, Jon Lamb and Malcolm Campbell joined with Sophie Thomson (*Gardening Australia*) and myself to score our favourites and we all had different winners.

Malcolm rated *Hungarian Heart* (96%), Jon favoured *Black Cherry* (83%) and *Wild Sweetie* (83%) equally. Michael chose de-hybridised *Rebel Yellow* (80%), Sophie preferred *Lemon Drop* (85%) and on the day I thought *Green Grape* (86%) best.

Most of us rated the supermarket hybrid worst at 35.8% compared with our average of 68.4% for heirlooms. Whilst *Tommy Toe* was equal second, it certainly was not as good on the day as 20 years ago when it won.

## *Commercial Varieties – F1 Hybrids*

The supermarket hybrid was picked up on the day and our commercial strains were chosen from the offerings at the Adelaide Market. Only one commercial variety beat the heirlooms so in fact the top 18 places were filled by heirlooms and the bottom 6 places by commercial red varieties – 60% lower than heirlooms.



# Adelaide Botanic Garden Tomato Taste Test February 2013

Ranking	Overall score	Variety	1993 Test	Colour	Size	Type	Intro date
=1	77.40%	<i>Hungarian Heart</i>	—	Pink	Oxheart	HL	2007
=1	77.30%	<i>Jaune Flamme</i>	—	Orange	Apricot	HL	2001
2	74.50%	<i>Tommy Toe</i>	1	Red	Apricot	HL	1993
3	74.00%	<i>Black Cherry</i>	—		Cherry	HL	2011
4	73.00%	<i>Wild Sweetie</i>	14	Red	Pea	HL	1994
5	72.30%	<i>Wapsipinicon Peach</i>	—	Opaque	Apricot	HL	2005
6	72.07%	<i>Lemon Drop</i>	—	Lemon	Grape	HL	2005
7	70.70%	<i>Ananas Noir</i>	—	Yellow/black	Beefsteak	HL	2012
8	68.80%	<i>Black Russian</i>	—	Black	Apricot	HL	1992
9	67.40%	<i>Periforme/Granny's Throwing</i>	—	Red	Large pear	HL	2012
10	66.80%	<i>Purple Smudge</i>	—	Orange	Beefsteak	HL	2012
11	66.50%	<i>Green Zebra</i>	16	Yellow/green stripe	Apricot	HL	1991
12	66.30%	<i>Rose de Berne</i>	—	Pink	Apricot	HL	2012
13	65.90%	<i>Green Grape</i>	—	Olive	Grape	HL	2007
14	65.50%	<i>Black Krim</i>	—	Black	Mini beefsteak	HL	1996
15	65.20%	<i>Violet Jasper</i>	—	Black	Apricot	HL	2012
16	64.40%	<i>Grosse Lisse</i>	15	Red	Large	HL/ST	—
17	64.00%	<i>Tigerella</i>	12	Yellow/red stripe	Apricot	HL	1992
18	63.07%	<i>Brown Berry</i>	—	Brown	Cherry	HL	2007
19	61.00%	<i>Tondo Piccolo Brido</i> (Franchi)	—	Red	Apricot	F1	—
20	60.70%	<i>Redunda</i> (Franchi)	—	Red	Obvate	F1	—
21	60.20%	<i>Beams Yellow Pear</i>	—	Yellow	Cherry	HL	—
22	57.30%	<i>Roma Virus Free</i>	—	Red	Plum	F1	—
23	54.36%	<i>Swanson</i>	—	Red	Obvate	F1	—
24	54.07%	<i>Marglobe</i>	—	Red	Obvate	OP/C	—
25	54.00%	<i>Malinche</i> (Monsanto)	—	Red	Obvate	F1	—
26	54.42%	<i>Nepoline</i>	—	Red	Obvate	F1	—
27	42.46%	Supermarket F1	29	Red	Obvate	F1	—

## Key

HL = Heirloom, open pollinated, true-to-type and publicly owned – all Diggers introductions.

HL/ST = Heirloom, standard comparative garden variety.

OP/C = Open pollinated commercial variety.

F1 = F1 hybrid, commercial variety, can't be resown, not true-to-type. Corporate ownership.

## Notes

- Results of 15 professional tasters (5 gardeners, 3 chefs, 7 media/botanic gardens staff).
- Principe Borghese* excluded – not correct variety.
- Hungarian Heart* was only trialled by 10, not 14/15 tasters.
- Dehybridised *Rebel Yellow* rated 70.40 but only 5 tried the fruit.
- Purple Russian* withdrawn to reduce number tasted and ensure full participation.

Statistics compiled by Clive Blazey – 60% flavour, 20% appearance, 20% texture

**Average Heirlooms** 2013 – **68.90%** 1993 – **60.93%**

**Average Commercial** 2013 – **49.70%** 1993 – **49.80%**

## Summary

The first eighteen varieties preferred were all heirlooms from Hungary, France, Italy, Russia and America, and seven of the bottom eight were red commercial varieties from the South Australian market.

Since the 1993 taste test which was won by *Tommy Toe*, fourteen varieties were regarded as better than the garden standard *Grosse Lisse* – ten of these superior varieties have been introduced in the last few years. Because a taste test of thirty varieties can be wearying on the taste buds, *Amish Paste*, *Mortgage Lifter* and five other top tasting tomatoes were excluded which, had they been listed, would take the list of superior heirlooms to between twenty and twenty-five.

Finally, if every publicly owned heirloom variety tastes better than the supermarket hybrids that make up ninety-five percent of supermarket tomato sales, what has this got to say about modern plant breeding over the last fifty years? Would you pay four hundred times the price of heirlooms to an overseas corporation when you can save your seeds and replant for nothing?



=1st *Hungarian Heart*



=1st *Jaune Flamme*



2nd *Tommy Toe*



3rd *Black Cherry*



4th *Wild Sweetie*



5th *Wapsipinicon Peach*



6th *Lemon Drop*



27th and last!  
Supermarket Hybrid