



Farm Notes

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POTOMAC VEGETABLE FARMS
www.potomacvegetablefarms.com
pvfnewsletter@gmail.com

Looking Back: Tomatoes Forever

by Hana Newcomb

I remember the way the seat felt on the one-row transplanter we used to plant tomatoes when I was seven years old. It was a simple L-shaped rusty metal chair with a lot of leg room. My legs extended straight out in front of me, and the flat of tomato plants was on my lap. My mother was in the seat on the other side and between us was the thing that made a furrow, and a tube where water poured out, in a clanky rhythm. The rolling packer wheels that closed the furrow as it went past us, those were scary. I was afraid they would roll right over my fingers.

By the time I was in high school we had a two-row transplanter with four seats on it. Children were often drafted to plant tomatoes as it was a task we could do well and we were light enough that the small tractor could pull us up and down the hills. Sometimes I had to get off if and walk behind, leaning over the back of the chair to plant, if the hills were too steep. Our father drove the tractor and we would yell "HO!" if we needed him to stop, but the real goal was to keep going, never stopping, switching flats of tomatoes on the fly.

We often planted just before a rain, when the clouds were gathering and thunder was getting louder. We raced to finish the field before we were drenched, as our father opened the throttle wider on the little tractor.

When I was just about ready to go to college, I think those were the years when the tomato numbers were out of control. One year we planted 35,000 plants (nowadays we plant something around 3,000). We could never keep up with all the tasks that went into growing tomatoes, and we were always behind on the picking. There were 16 different patches, planted in close succession. We had to hoe them, mulch them (spreading thousands of bales of straw by



photo courtesy of hana newcomb

hand all through May and June) and then we had to pick them.

In those days, we didn't stake the tomatoes. They grew on the ground. A lot of tomatoes rotted but we threw out all the rotting tomatoes as we picked, so there were tomatoes flying the whole time we picked, bent over, without shoes. We picked barefoot to protect the vines from getting smashed and broken by boots.

There is much that has stayed the same with our tomatoes, but very little is the same about the way we plant and tend and pick them. All of that is easier and more under control. We no longer have hundreds of baskets of ripe tomatoes sitting in the shade, under the trees. We keep them in air conditioning as much as we can, never letting them get cold. They hold so much better than they used to. They still taste the same, and we still depend on them to be the most important crop we grow for all the summer months.

Tomatoes have defined a big part of my life, and I only eat ours – which is why canning soups and sauces and whole peeled tomatoes is also a big part of our life now. I have grown to be a total tomato snob, growing up in the midst of so much bounty. Everyone gets something from their childhood. I grew up in a world of tomato privilege.

In the Field...

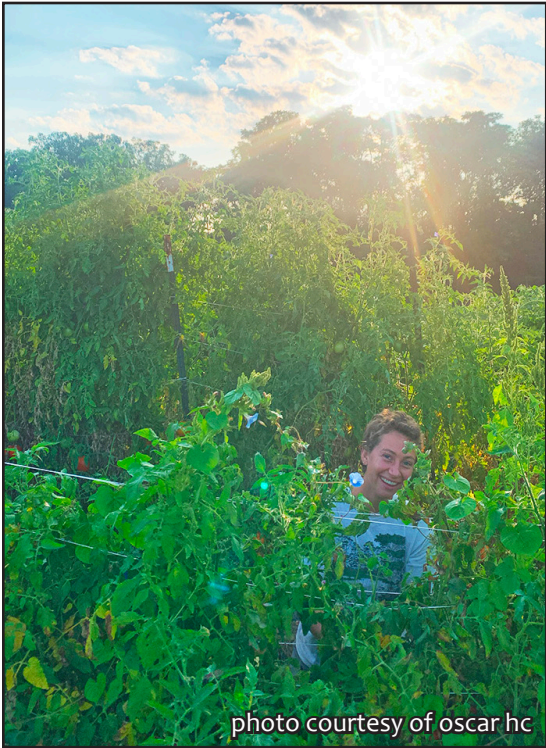


photo courtesy of oscar hc

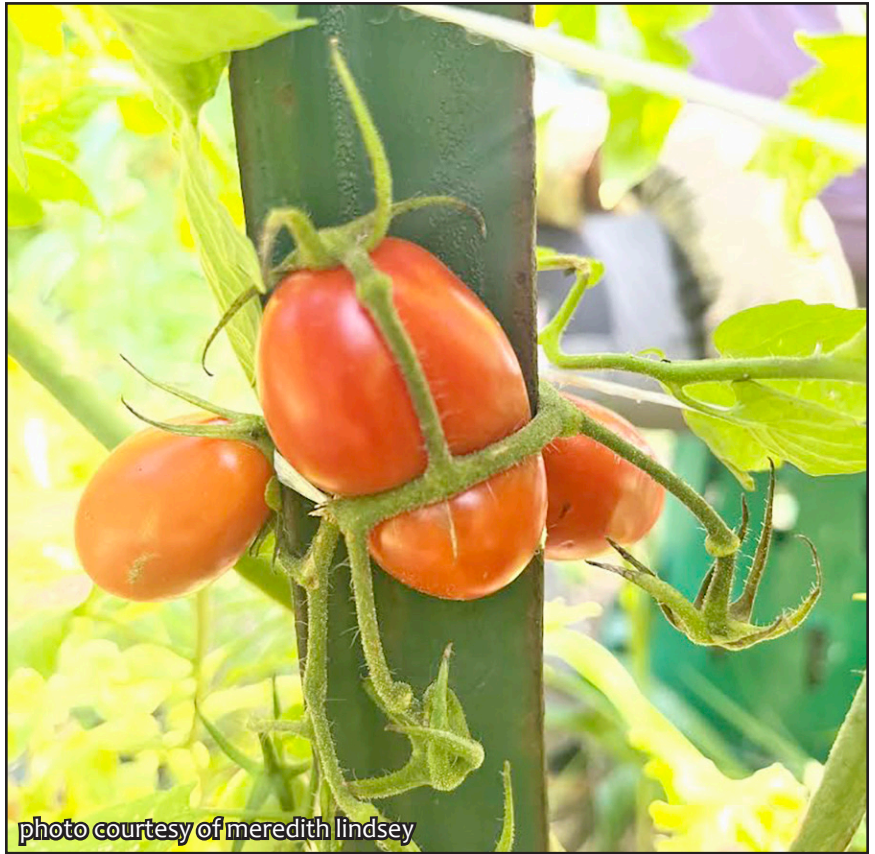


photo courtesy of meredith lindsey



photo courtesy of oscar hc



photo courtesy of oscar hc

On the Table...



photo courtesy of helen roads



photo courtesy of rachel udall



photo courtesy of oscar he



photo courtesy of helen roads



photo courtesy of rachel udall



photo courtesy of ciara prencipe

In the Kitchen...



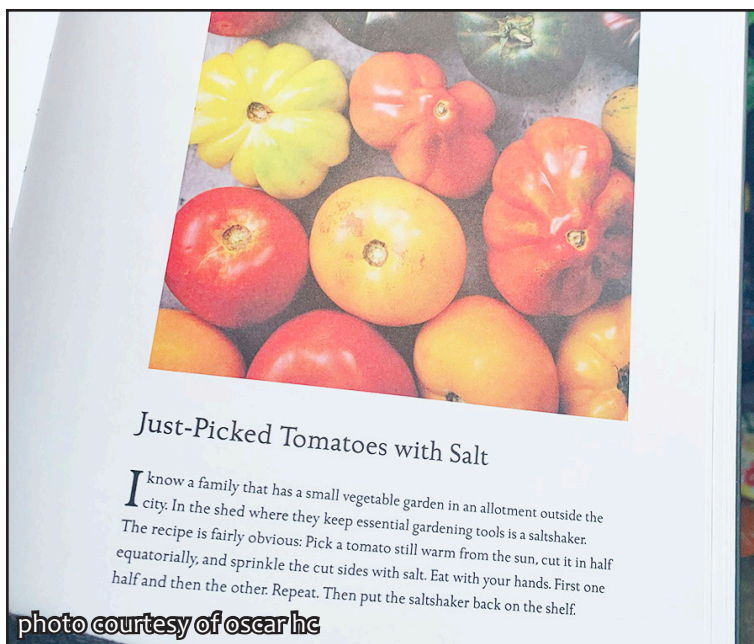
photo courtesy of oscar hc



photo courtesy of hedy renner



photo courtesy of hana newcomb



Just-Picked Tomatoes with Salt

I know a family that has a small vegetable garden in an allotment outside the city. In the shed where they keep essential gardening tools is a saltshaker. The recipe is fairly obvious: Pick a tomato still warm from the sun, cut it in half equatorially, and sprinkle the cut sides with salt. Eat with your hands. First one half and then the other. Repeat. Then put the saltshaker back on the shelf.

photo courtesy of oscar hc

Tomatoes are so yellow they turn our fingers black
 So tall they fall to the floor
 So soft they make you itch
 So delicious they're disgusting
 So special that it's boring
 I love them, I hate them, I barely notice them
 Tomatoes are our lifeblood, our special baby
 But also? They hardly matter. It's everything
 AROUND them that makes the money, keeps us
 fed.

How can they be so heavy and contain so little
 food?

I know what you'll say,
 Dialectics
 In taoism this wouldn't be a problem
 It's just because you believe poles to be aligned
 with good and evil, god and the lucifer
 Live Ideas, because you can't talk about christianity
 in america without discussing live ideas
 Tomatoes are the angel and the devil
 The tomato season is so long,
 And it's way, way too short.

We try to measure them in every which way
 But they are just completely beyond
 comprehension, brimming with an ancient magic,
 And the scientists say they're filled with molecules,
 atoms, every one identifiable
 The say that tomatoes are mostly empty space
 But we know that tomatoes contain multitudes
 -Anonymous