

Tomatoes

by Lydia Lovell

Aunt Olivia's kitchen barn faced the west; bordering its south side, in full sun all summer, stretched the tomato garden. Here the soil, enriched each fall with rich manures from animal stalls and hen-house, together with a load of dried seaweed from the beach, produced a tall green hedge of plants which, in turn, produced a challenge in tomatoes.

In addition to feeding the earth in autumn, Aunt Olivia top-dressed all her gardens, each spring, with compost she'd made over a twelve-month period. Composting wasn't a big project; rather than bury goodnesses in a hole in the ground, she tossed clippings, weedings, and kitchen wastes into a 3' x 3' x 3' wooden crib. When the collection got smelly or attracted flies, she shovelled a few spadefuls of earth on top. Otherwise, she let nature take its course and, each spring, had about eight bushels of rich, light, spongy compost.

If proof of the pudding is in the eating, Aunt Olivia's tomatoes were proof indeed; she did something just right for growing tomatoes. Perhaps some patience was the most important ingredient. The challenge lay in using tomato harvest to best advantage.

Because we looked it up, we know the tomato is an herb native to South America and belongs to the nightshade family. Its fruit is second only to potatoes in economic value in the United States.

Rich in minerals and vitamins A and C, tomatoes rate high nutritionally. Besides, they are delicious in salads, soups, preserves, pickles, juices and sauces. We bake, stew, fry and scallop them. And we eat them raw, like apples.

Were I to be cast ashore on a desert island, there are only four things I'd hope to find growing wild: onions, potatoes, carrots and tomatoes. Given those, and fresh water, I could survive.

If you planted a half-dozen tomato plants last Memorial Day weekend, laid on enough fertilizer, and watered during long hot dry spells, you're finding yourself over-supplied with tomatoes now August has rolled around. If you didn't, probably friends and neighbors who did are now begging you to help dispose of the harvest. Since one medium-sized fruit supplies nearly half your daily vitamin C needs, in good conscience, you can't waste them.

Aunt Olivia knew more ways to serve tomatoes than you could shake a stick at; before her family of six tired of one way of eating them, she'd switch to another recipe.

Six red ripe tomatoes yield enough stewed tomatoes for one meal. Remove stem ends, cut in quarters. Peel and mince a small onion, crumble a few leaves of dried basil, and put all in a heavy skillet with one tablespoon of oleo. Cook over low heat 15 or 20 minutes. Keep an eye on them so they don't burn. Season to taste with salt and pepper.



To stew green tomatoes, cook as long as 30 minutes or until tender; add a half-cup of water when putting on to cook, and sweeten with one tablespoon of sugar. For variety, and to use up heels or crusts of bread, stir in a half-cupful just before serving. Or pour the cooked tomatoes into a greased casserole, top with toasted bread cubes, and sprinkle with grated cheese. Bake until bubbly and cheese melts.

To fry tomatoes, slice red or green ones 1/2 inch thick; dip slices in a mixture of 1/2 cup fine dry bread crumbs or flour, 1/2 teaspoon of salt, and a pinch of pepper. Fry until golden brown in a large skillet in a small amount of oil. Use one tomato per serving.

To broil tomatoes, remove stem ends and cut in half, crosswise; place, cut side up, on broiling pan. Brush with melted butter, sprinkle with salt and pepper, and slide under preheated broiler with top of fruit about three inches below flame or unit. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for ripe tomatoes or 20 to 25 minutes for green ones. Broil only until tender.

Prepare red or green tomatoes for baking as you would for broiling, but place them in a shallow, covered greased casserole instead of the broiler pan. Add just enough hot water to cover the bottom of the dish. Cover and bake at 375° adding 15 minutes to cooking time.

Use only ripe red fruit for stuffed tomatoes. Cut a slice from stem end, scoop out center, leaving a 1/4 inch thick shell. Chop pulp; mix with an equal quantity of soft bread crumbs. Sauté two tablespoons each of minced onion and minced green peppers and 1/2 teaspoon of crushed dried basil in one tablespoon of butter until lightly brown. Add pulp-and-crumbs mixture and heat through. Salt and pepper mixture before filling tomato shells. Arrange in a greased casserole and add just enough hot water to cover bottom of dish, as for baking. Cover and bake 30 minutes at 375°.

Tomato aspic salad is a favorite in the Lovell clan. Soften one tablespoon unflavored gelatin in 1/4 cup of cold water. Cook 1 1/2 cups chopped up fresh ripe tomatoes, one tablespoon minced onion, and 1/2 of a small bay leaf together for 20 minutes. Press through a sieve. This should yield about 1 3/4 cups; if not enough, add a bit of boiling water. Combine with gelatin and stir until it dissolves. Season with 1/2 teaspoon of sugar, 1/2 teaspoon salt, pinch of pepper, and a tablespoon of lemon juice. Chill.

When mixture begins to stiffen, add 1/2 cup each of finely chopped cucumber and of chopped celery. Stir thoroughly and pour into square cake tin rinsed in cold water. Continue chilling until firm. Serve portions on lettuce bed with choice of dressings.

A fine way to use a peaking tomato harvest is in tomato cocktail. Cook together for 20 minutes a generous quart of chopped tomatoes, one cup chopped celery, 1/4 cup chopped green pepper, 1/2 bay leaf, 1/2 small chopped onion. Cool and press through a sieve. Season juice with 1/2 teaspoon salt, one teaspoon Worcestershire sauce, 1/2 teaspoon grated horseradish, and a dash of Tabasco sauce. Pour into a tall jar and chill. Shake well before serving. This yields 1 quart and keeps, refrigerated, about a week.

We don't have a big barn like the one at Aunt Olivia's, but we do have a garage. We set out our tomato plants along its south wall each spring. We make compost just as she did, except we use a bin made of green plastic panels that comes all apart when we slide a panel up to the top. Since we don't keep hens, a cow, or a horse, we use commercial dried manures.

Following her example, we haul in a bushel basketful of seaweed from the shore and spread it over the tomato garden in the fall because we're convinced something in the kelp gives tomatoes a special zip they would otherwise be lacking.

While it's not quite honest to say you can't ever have too many tomatoes, we anticipate with pleasure the August days when we begin the harvest, and gather with a certain regret the remaining green ones from the tired vines just before frost comes in October.