Black tomatoes are some of the finest tomatoes on earth

The color black was once regarded as unlucky, but not in 1926. That was the year Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel came out with a simple, straight, calf-length black dress. The Little Black Dress was born and women have never looked back.

The little black dress went with everything and was everywhere. In her first cartoons, Betty Boop was originally drawn in a little black dress. Wally Simpson, the Duchess of Windsor, famously said, "When a little black dress is right, there is nothing else to wear in its place." The LBD, as it became known, was not just for a ladies' matinee but for having breakfast, as Audrey Hepburn showed in "Breakfast at Tiffany's," complete with a string of pearls.

Black is a fashion statement even seeps into the garden. The latest rage in gardening is black tomatoes. These "black" tomatoes are often various dark colors of deep purple, dusky brown and mahogany. Most black tomatoes come to us from the Southern Ukraine in the early 19th century soldiers returning from the Crimean War brought "black" tomato seeds to Russia. Today those are more than 50 varieties of black tomato.

And like the little black dress, black tomatoes are winning people over. Black tomatoes have a deep, almost earthy flavor. More than one blind taste test has gone to such stars as the Paul Robeson black heirloom tomato. Named after the noted opera star and civil rights hero, the Paul Robeson tomato is a medium-size beefsteak tomato with extremely dark color and green shoulders. The Black Krim tomato grows the normally salty taste so need very little salting. It is one of the most productive tomatoes you can grow, and it even does well in containers.

Many gardeners sing the praises of Pink Brandywine until they taste the Black Brandywine tomato. This maroon-red tomato can weigh up to 2 pounds with a deeper, richer flavor than the original Brandywine. It is bred from a cross of Brandywine and either Black Prince or Cherokee Purple. The Black Bear tomato is a 4- to 6-ounce pear-shaped tomato that is very high yielding. There are even tiny black cherry tomatoes. The genetically named Black Cherry Tomato grows in huge clusters like grapes. These basic black tomatoes are big on flavor. They have rich, smoky flavors that make ordinary cherry tomatoes seem bland by comparison.

Black tomato seeds are available from such mail-order companies as Tomato Growers Supply (www.tomatogrowers.com), Seed Savers Exchange (www.seedsavers.org) or by mail at Seed Savers Exchange, 3994 North Winn Road, Decorah, IA 52101; and Baker Creek Seeds (phone 417-924-8917, or by mail at Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, 2278 Baker Creek Road, Mansfield, MO 65704.)

Start tomato seeds indoors six to eight weeks before you want to transplant them into the garden. sow seeds about 1/4 inch deep in flats or pots. Keep them well watered but not soggy. You can cover the flats or pots with a plastic bag to keep the soil moist. Tomato seeds germinate best in warm soil. Transplant into a sunny spot in the garden that has lots of organic material worked in. Avoid over-watering or over-fertilizing. Too much water can ruin the flavor and result in splitting or cracking of the fruits. Too much fertilizer can result in lots of leaves and few tomatoes. Tomato flowers contain both male and female parts in the same flower, so they are self-pollinating without need of bees or other insects. Even so, if you want to save your own seeds it's best to separate varieties by at least six feet to ensure purity. For best seeds, let your tomatoes fully ripen. Squeeze out the pulp that contains the seeds into a cup or jar. Add a few tablespoons of water and let the seeds and pulp ferment in a warm place for three to four days. The fermentation process kills many seed-borne diseases and aids germination.

After the three to four days, the seeds will sink to the bottom and can be carefully strained out and allowed to air dry for about two weeks. Once they're dry you can place tomato seeds in airtight jars or plastic bags and store them in a cool, dry place. Timeless as black is, your seeds can live for up to 50 years. Start your black tomato plants now and by midsummer you'll be eating the finest tomatoes on earth. Like the little black dress, these rich and smoky black gems go well with every meal. Even breakfast, whether at Tiffany's or not.

Address questions or comments to Paul Barbone c/o the Cape Gazette.
Lopez

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Lopez. "I had heard how helpful he had been...I heard this over and over again." Sparks said. "Ernie is one of the most positive individuals you will ever meet. Each day, the best word, everything is great."

Relocating to Sussex County's new extension building at the Elberton Farm, of the New York City Extension Research and Education Center in Georgetown sealed the deal. Lopez was thankful for the opportunity to be closer to his parents and in-laws, who lived in the Cape May Court area and to attend, in 1994, for the university of Cape Henlopen High School.

The transition from academic to agriculture was an adventure. The hustle and bustle at the Delaware State Fair in July 2006 was quite an indoctrination into the world of 4-H. Lopez hit the clover running and absorbed the diversity of 4-H he saw on display. "The fair was like a big buffet," Lopez recalls. "I got to experience the diversity of the projects and the styles of their labs." Sparks agrees. "It was a great opportunity to meet so many people in informal situations and see for myself the diversity that people young engaged in 4-H activities," she said.

Lopez presents a fresh, modern face to 4-H's rich, 106-year-old history as the nation's largest youth program. As a community of young people across America who develop leadership, citizenship, and life skills for youth ages 5-18, 4-H offers a broad range of programs. More than 300 curriculum areas or "projects" from which a youth member or adult volunteer leader can select to concentrate on. Project areas range from performing and graphic arts, to science, engineering and technology. In between are the multitude of traditional agricultural disciplines, followed by 4-H Cooperative Extension, that first earned 4-H in recognition and excellent reputation.

This July marks Lopez's second anniversary with extension. He considers the organization the jewel of the university, and regards his colleagues as "the smartest people out there -- on the front lines, delivering university knowledge and research that really resonates with the community." Mark Isaac, director of the Carvel Research and Education Center, is proud of Lopez. "Ernie has been an excellent addition to our 4-H team. During his first two years in extension, Ernie's teamwork attitude has been instrumental in expanding our 4-H initiatives in Sussex County," Isaac said. "His engaging personality and excellent communication skills, along with his tremendous commitment to youth leadership and development, have also allowed Ernie to strengthen 4-H programs across the state." Lopez's mission to strengthen 4-H focuses on three target areas: building teen leadership, providing adult volunteer recruitment and training, and establishing the 4-H brand across Delaware.

He holds regular meetings with 4-H teen leaders across the state and recently conducted his second State 4-H Teen Conference -- a weekend-long workshop that concentrates on leadership skills through workshop sessions, free exchange of ideas and interactions with guests speakers. The enthusiasm doesn't end at these events. Young 4-H adults often stop by, unannounced, in between college classes -- or just because they are in the area -- to chat and share more ideas. Lopez sees a generous attitude in them. "They never say or imply, 'It's about me,'" he says admiringly. "It's always about doing something good for someone else."

Lopez wants to capitalize on this goodwill and use it to involve key supporters in the community. "We're working with partners in a supportive role to put together an organizational, support from local business, government and community leaders, all of which are necessary and valued resource."

Small, tangible ways to connect the community with 4-H are highly valued. Preparing for two weeks of state 4-H camp is a good example. "Whether a local business owner donates fireworks for campfire, or when Allen's Family Foods donates chickens for campers' dinners, every level of support is deeply appreciated," Lopez said. "It's quick to emphasize that give-and-take is necessary to build and sustain community relationships."

"Our 4-H'ers are natural leaders working with adults," Lopez said. "I want to hear from the community, what can we do for you? What event are you having, what area can we be helpful -- where could we use our talented pool of youth?"

Another resource of talent is the adult volunteers, known as leaders. Leaders are the engine of the program -- a reservoir of talent that comes from community adults -- business leaders, educators and parents with special skills to share, Lopez said. Based on parental requests, Lopez took the initiative to execute background screenings of direct volunteers. According to Sparks, certain procedures were already in place, including a volunteer application and interview process -- but there was a need to push it up a level. In a non-threatening way, Ernie led Delaware 4-H on a process in which all volunteers were screened over a six-month period, Sparks said.

"He diligently worked with county staff and attended local leader meetings to share information and make the process painless."

As a result of that effort, all volunteers who work directly with children have criminal background screenings. "It gives us more validity in the eyes of the community," said Lopez. Lopez can relate to the concerns and responsibilities of parenthood. He and Jami reside in Lewes and are the proud parents of two young daughters. Anna Christine, 2, and Claire Elizabeth, 2 months.

Soon enough, the 4-H clover's 'Green Power' will start appearing at home. Lopez looks forward to his children wearing 4-H T-shirts, showing off their 4-H project books and displaying award ribbons won at county and state fair events.

He will ensure that his daughter appreciate the meaning behind the four P's, the significance of the clover emblem and the good fortune associated with it. As soon as Anna and Claire reach the Cloverbud age of 5 years, they will begin learning and practicing the 4-H pledge: "I pledge my heart to everyday tending, my Heart for greater loyalty, my Hands for larger service, and my Heart and Health to better living, for my club, my community, my country and my world."

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