

# The versatile vegetable

by Tonya Jennings

Tomatoes are probably the most popular of all home-grown vegetables. When grown organically they provide us with the best, most intensely perfumed juice, flavour, taste and colour.

Tomatoes come in all colours, shapes and sizes – red, round and sweet, pear-formed and mellow yellow, purple, heart-shaped and mild or green, oval and tangy. Usually thought of as a vegetable, they are botanically a fruit – a berry to be precise, but as they are used as a vegetable they are classed as one.

There are many nutritional benefits of eating tomatoes. They are loaded with vitamins A, C and E, along with potassium and calcium. They are also known for their disease-fighting phytochemicals – most notably the potent antioxidant lycopene, which helps to lower cholesterol.

Many commercial tomato growers produce fruit



that looks good but tastes bland. They select varieties for factors other than taste – such as high yield, uniformity of fruit size, resistance to disease, and ability to withstand bruising during machine picking and transport. Many conventional tomatoes are picked green and ripened with ethylene gas, for continuity of supply. If you have only ever eaten tomatoes bought from the supermarket, seek out a local organic retailer or farmers' market or, better still, grow them yourself, and find out what a real tomato tastes like.

Tomatoes are now listed by international seed organisations as among the most genetically threatened of all the earth's crops. A staggering 80.6% of tomato varieties were lost during the period from 1903 to 1983. One of the main causes, along with land clearing and pollution, is the replacement of traditional or heirloom varieties with commercial hybrids.

Thanks to many wonderful farmers who saved seeds, heirloom varieties are returning and some are showing up at farmers' markets all around Australia.

With the many different varieties of tomatoes available we are able to buy them all year round, with the best coming towards the end of summer and into autumn. Often the smaller varieties are preferable for raw eating, and the larger for cooking.



*Stuffed with prawns and horseradish chantilly*