



Garden Notes

GN 109

CHERRY TOMATOES

CULTURE

Cherry tomatoes have small, cherry to golf ball-sized fruit that is often used in salads. They are heat-loving plants that range in size from dwarf to seven-footers. Give them full sun, soil that is well amended with compost and a cage or stake to grow on. Plant seedlings in the garden after all danger of frost is past. Keep the soil around new transplants moist for the first 3 to 4 weeks. Water established plants when the soil dries to about 2 to 3 inches deep. Apply enough water to wet the root zone thoroughly. Since weather and the depth of rooting vary, the right interval for applying water in the summer can vary from 1 to 3 times a week to once every 10 to 14 days. Plants are best irrigated by using soaker hoses, drip irrigation, or any means that applies water slowly without wetting the foliage. To boost growth, use fish emulsion or other mild nitrogen fertilizer when the plants set their first fruit and every 4 to 6 weeks thereafter. Too much nitrogen makes plants grow leaves at the expense of fruit. Cherry tomatoes are notorious for splitting before or right after they have been picked with some varieties more prone to split than others.

VARIETIES

The six cherry tomato varieties listed below were grown in the Fair Oaks Horticulture Center Vegetable Demonstration Area during the spring and summer of 2007. Because these varieties grow prolifically and must be contained or trained to control their sprawl, each plant was grown inside cages made of concrete reinforcing wire. One row containing each variety was heavily mulched with straw to prevent the soil from drying out. A second identical row was mulched with red plastic, as research has shown that infrared rays from the plastic could increase production.

Variety	Type	**Days to Maturity	Characteristics
Black Cherry	Hybrid	65	Reddish brown to purple; may have green shoulders
Green Grape	Heirloom	70	Green, turning amber when ripe; short, compact plants
Snow White	Hybrid	75	Ivory, pale yellow when ripe
Sun Sugar FT Hybrid	Hybrid	62	Orange, borne in long clusters; crack resistant; resistant to fusarium wilt and tobacco mosaic virus
Sweet Baby Girl	Hybrid	65	Dark red, grows in long clusters; resistant to tobacco mosaic virus
Sweet Gold FT Hybrid	Hybrid	60	Bright yellow-gold; resistant to fusarium wilt and tobacco mosaic virus

** Days to Maturity – The approximate time between transplanting to the garden and the appearance of ripe fruit.

FAIR OAKS HORTICULTURE CENTER CHERRY TOMATO DEMONSTRATION (2007) - SUMMARY

All of the cherry tomato plants grown in 2007 grew quite vigorously, as cherry tomatoes tend to do, and with the exception of both 'Sweet Baby Girl' plants (see additional information below), none experienced any disease.

USE OF RED PLASTIC MULCH

A joint effort by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Clemson University has resulted in the development of a reflecting red mulch film called *Selective Reflecting Mulch* or *SRM-Red*. This material, a thin plastic film (1.0 mil.), performs like black plastic mulch: warming the soil, suppressing weeds, and retaining moisture. It also increases production of tomatoes. The red color reflects intensified red light onto the plant and has been shown in USDA tests to produce from 12 to 20% more tomatoes than with black plastic. Field tests at the Agricultural Research Service in Florence, South Carolina, have indicated that red plastic mulch suppresses root-knot nematode damage in tomatoes.

As mentioned in the *Garden Note*, one row containing one plant of each variety was heavily mulched with straw to prevent the soil from drying out, and a second identical row was mulched with *SRM-Red*. Production statistics were kept until Harvest Day on August 4, 2007, to see if there was any difference in tomato production, and our findings indicated that the row mulched with straw outperformed the *SRM-Red* row by 10.5%. Because production statistics were not kept for the entire growing season, it is unknown if the *SRM-Red* row would have ultimately produced more cherry tomatoes than the row mulched with straw. The following chart shows the production results as well as information about weed suppression, moisture retention, and plant growth. This was not a trial (soil conditions, plastic thickness, irrigation, and other conditions may have been different from USDA and other tests), but rather was an experiment that might interest home gardeners.

	Straw	SRM-Red
Weed suppression	Some common purslane and spotted spurge; moderate sprouting of seeds in straw (wheat or oats).	No weeds with the exception of common purslane and spotted spurge, which were hard to remove under mulch.
Moisture retention	Soil moderately moist.	Soil quite moist.
Plant growth	Vigorous, bushy growth; plants noticeably, but not dramatically, taller.	Vigorous, bushy growth; some occasional slight wilting of leaf tips.
Total Yield (as of August 4, 2007)	95 pounds	86 pounds

Red plastic mulch is available through the following mail-order sources:

- Peaceful Valley Farm & Garden Supply (www.GrowOrganic.com)
- Gardener's Supply Company (www.gardeners.com)
- Territorial Seed Company (www.territorialseed.com)
- Pinetree Garden Seeds (www.superseeds.com)

To simplify information, trade names of products and company names have been used. No endorsement of named products or companies is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products or companies that are not mentioned.

Tomato plants were started from seed on February 28, 2007, and transplanted into the ground on April 28, 2007. After three months of growth, tomatoes were harvested for tasting at Harvest Day (August 4, 2007); the production statistics as of that date are set out at the end of each entry. All plants, except 'Sweet Baby Girl', continued to produce prolifically until they were pulled out in September.

'Black Cherry' – A truly black cherry tomato. It is not a plum, but a perfectly round cherry with classic black tomato flavor; sweet yet rich and complex. Fruit picks clean from the stem and is produced in abundance on vigorous, tall plants. These cherries are a unique addition to the color spectrum of cherry tomatoes now available. Indeterminate. Ready to pick 65 days from setting plants outside.

Many tasters thought the color was unique (brownish-red with occasional green shoulders) and the flavor was very good, although not really sweet like gold or orange cherry tomatoes.

Straw mulched row: 11 pounds

Red plastic mulched row: 9 pounds



'Green Grape' – Very short compact plants yield ¾ to 1 inch fruit that is yellow-green when ripe and easy to harvest. A prolific producer that is full of flavor, sweet and juicy. Determinate. Ready to pick 70 days from setting plants outside.

This variety was a favorite of many tasters, although some tomato "purists" were a little turned off by green tomatoes. The plants were a little slow to begin producing tomatoes, but when they got going, production was very good. The plants are determinate, so they yielded less than some of the other indeterminate varieties.

Straw mulched row: 8 pounds

Red plastic mulched row: 11 pounds



'Snow White' – Delightful ivory-colored cherry tomatoes ripen to pale yellow and are sweet without being sugary. Indeterminate. Ready to pick 75 days from setting plants outside.

Many tasters were fond of the mild, sweet flavor. Production throughout the growing season was quite high.

Straw mulched row: 12 pounds

Red plastic mulched row: 11 pounds



'Sun Sugar FT Hybrid' – A hybrid orange cherry tomato with unbelievably good flavor and productivity. Very sweet, fruity-tasting tomatoes are borne in long clusters on vigorous plants. Many other cherry tomatoes have a tendency to crack, especially when ripe, but this one has crack resistance bred in while still keeping a thin skin. Indeterminate. Ready to pick 62 days from setting plants outside.

This variety was extremely popular with tasters. It was one of the first to set fruit, and production throughout the growing season was very high.

Straw mulched row: 18 pounds

Red plastic mulched row: 16 pounds



'Sweet Baby Girl Hybrid' – A cherry tomato that is extra flavorful and sweet on a productive but more manageable plant. 'Sweet Baby Girl' usually has large harvests of tomatoes on healthy, compact plants. Dark red fruit has sweet flavor and grows in long clusters. Resistant to tobacco mosaic virus. Compact indeterminate. Ready to pick 65 days from setting plants outside.

Both plants initially started out healthy, although not very robust; however, mid-way through the growing season, both plants began turning brown and spindly without much foliage which resulted in sunburn to the fruit. They began producing early, but the plants were in such bad shape by Harvest Day that there was not much fruit available for tasting. It was not determined what caused the plants to decline.

Straw mulched row: 13 pounds

Red plastic mulched row: 11 pounds

'Sweet Gold FT Hybrid' – Vigorous vines produce abundant clusters of ½ oz. bright yellow-gold cherry tomatoes with delicious sweet flavor. These tomatoes are naturally sweeter than red cherry varieties with a fruitier taste. Indeterminate. Ready to pick 60 days from setting plants outside.

This variety was one of the first to set fruit. Tasters loved this sweet tomato, and production was extremely high. This variety was, however, prone to cracking after being picked.

Straw mulched row: 33 pounds

Red plastic mulched row: 28 pounds

