

What Vegetable Varieties Should I Plant

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

There isn't a spring that goes by that I'm not asked what tomato variety to plant or what sweet corn cultivar/hybrid should someone get or beans or carrots or, well, you get the picture. Now keep in mind that I don't mind this at all. It is part of my job after all. But sometimes people will ask specifically what I know about variety XYZ. This request may well be met with a blank stare from me especially if you ask me this while I'm in the middle of the grocery store.

The blank stare isn't because I don't care or I'm annoyed that you stopped me. The blank stare is because sometimes I have to dig into my resources to see what I can find out about that particular variety. Case in point, tomatoes. I have a book called Garden Seed Inventory that was last published about 15 years ago that listed ALL the known cultivars of all garden species and where you could buy them at that time. While it hasn't been updated recently, it's usually my go to starting point. When you look at the sections on the aforementioned tomatoes you come up with over 1,500 cultivars of tomatoes. Fifteen hundred! That's a lot of tomatoes! If you ask me about Jet Star or Beefsteak, I can give you a fairly quick answer. But if you ask me about Sophia's Choice or Red Supreme, I'm going to have to do some checking!

While tomatoes have about the most cultivars to select from some other commonly grown vegetables aren't slackers either. Green or wax beans - 300 cultivars, beets - 81, cabbage - 83, carrot - 127, cucumber - 133, eggplant - 102, garlic - 274, onion - 113, peas - 135, pepper (all types) - 664, potato - 129, radish - 138, pumpkin - 212, watermelon - 162. To say it's crazy to try to keep up is an understatement! (I have a similar book for fruit cultivars as well - equally insane! Over 100 pages of apples alone, 3,000+ listed cultivars!)

Many of those cultivars are not well suited to our part of Kansas. Which one you select often comes down to what are you intending to use your produce for. Are you more interested in fresh eating, preserving through canning or freezing, or possibly you want to grow for a farmer's market. How you intend to use your produce can make a big difference in which cultivar to select. If you talk to a market grower, the tomato variety they are planting isn't likely to be something like Beefsteak or Jet Star, but more likely something like Florida 47 or Florida 91.

Some cultivars are brand new, some are heirlooms. Some are hybrids, others are old open pollinated types. What you plant can be a combination of many factors. In some cases, newer is better, and in some cases long time standbys are tough to beat. My mom was planting Table Queen acorn squash in the 1950s and I still plant it today. This cultivar dates back to at least 1835 and likely before that. It is still one of our recommended cultivars of winter squash. So how do you know?

For starters, talk to me, talk with other gardeners, trust your own experience. If you've planted a cultivar for a couple of years and it didn't do well, don't plant it again! Just because a store has garden seeds in stock it doesn't mean they are well adapted to Kansas, especially if it's a chain store. We do have a bulletin at the Extension Office (and available online) called Recommended Vegetable Varieties (Bulletin L-41). Enter that in your internet search engine and you will find it! It lists recommended cultivars for Kansas based on performance in the gardens of Master Gardeners and in variety trials at K-State. It truly is a wealth of information! You can obtain a copy at the Extension Office (119 East 9th St, Junction City) or online!