

Rodeo Tomato

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Every year Jerry Parsons Ph.D., Texas A&M Professor Larry Stein and Horticulture Agent David Rodriguez lead a team of Gardening Volunteers of South Texas and Master Gardeners that conduct tests of available tomato varieties to identify a high performing selection to be designated as the Rodeo Tomato for the year.

Among the varieties selected in past years are the popular Celebrity, Solar Fire, Surefire, BHN 968, Tycoon, and Red Deuce. Being selected Rodeo Tomato for the year means it is subject of an extensive media campaign and is sold for the first time after it receives the designation at the San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo. This year the Rodeo is running from February 9- 26. The Bexar County Master Gardeners will be selling the Rodeo Tomato and other plants in the Little Buckaroo Farm Tent near the Food Court. Funds from the sale of the Rodeo Tomatoes sold at the Rodeo support the youth gardening effort in Bexar County.

This year's Rodeo Tomato is called Harris Moran 1823 (HM1823). It is described as a medium sized tomato with a round but flattened shape. It is a determinate plant which means it finishes its foliage growth quickly and concentrates on setting fruit on the relatively small plant. That is best for Central Texas gardens because tomatoes must be set before the summer heat shuts the process down. Even though the plant is modest- sized the HM1823 can produce 25lbs of fruit per plant if it is watered and fertilized generously. HM1823 has a good package of fungal and viral disease resistance but is not nematode resistant. In an unusual claim, the HM1823 is described as having a superior taste because of a good blend of sweetness and acidity. It will be interesting to compare it to BHN 968, the cherry tomato that consistently wins tomato taste tests in our area.

On the weekend of the 18th of February, the HM1823 will be available at some nurseries with income from sales donated to the AgriLife Extension youth gardening effort. Call around to find a nursery with the Rodeo Tomato plants and a plan to donate the funds to the youth gardening effort.

If you purchase tomatoes at the Rodeo or at an area nursery in February because the selection is good, or you want to support the youth gardening effort, it is too early to plant them in the garden. Instead "pot them up".

"Potting up" tomatoes is the process of temporarily placing a transplant in a one gallon or larger container so it can continue growing even if the soil temperatures are too cold for tomato growth. Fill the container with potting mix and fertilize with a generous helping of Osmocote. After planting the tomato seedling in the container place it in a sunny spot sheltered from the wind. If the forecast is for temperatures below 40 degrees any evening, move the potted tomatoes inside until the air warms up.

Potted tomatoes treated in the manner described maintain a fast growth rate and will be ready to transplant into the garden after April 1 when the soil warms up. They (the "potted up tomatoes") are the plants that produce the first tomatoes of the season that are photographed in local newspapers every year.