**Primetime**

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**Rodeo Tomato**

If you are one of the many gardeners who like to test the new Rodeo tomato each year, they are available at the Rodeo now for $3 per 4 inch pot or 4 for $10.

This year’s introduction BHN 6O2 is described as a plant that produces globe-shaped 12 ounce fruit. The plants are determinate so should be manageable in the garden or in a container.

Look for the Rodeo tomato in the new “Buckaroos on the Ranch: A Truly Texas Experience Pavilion” at the Bexar County Master Gardener booth.

In 2010 the Rodeo Tomato was Tycoon. The new introduction is going to have to perform very well to match the Tycoon. It produced large fruit on a relatively small plant. The Tycoon plants were very productive even in the extreme conditions of 2011. It won the top tomato prize at local competitions for uniform, well colored, firm fruit. One of the most important characteristics of Tycoon was that it was Yellow Tomato Wilt resistant. The white-fly-spread disease wiped out many plantings in 2010 but did not touch the Tycoon in 2011.

Tycoon is available on the market for 2012. Include a few in your garden as insurance against the Yellow Tomato Wilt and so you can compare it to BHN 602 and other varieties.

In 2012 you should be able to find limited numbers of Heatwave, Merced, Surefire, and Dwarf Cherry Surprise along with generous supplies of 444, Solar Fire, Sun Pride, and Celebrity.

Be conservative in your tomato culture, temperatures have been mild but the soil is still cool. Tomatoes planted in cold soil harden off and fruit production is delayed.

Potting-up is a widespread San Antonio practice to use for tomato transplants purchased early when selection is best but it is too cold to plant directly into the garden. Put individual transplants in one gallon black plastic pots filled with potting mix and enriched with Osmocote.

The containers can be kept in the greenhouse or put in a sunny spot out of the wind. If the temperature is forecast to fall to 40ºF or below, move the outside tomatoes inside until the temperatures warm up again. Treated in this manner the transplants will grow at a fast rate and be ready to transplant into the garden after April 1 when soil and air temperatures are high enough to support bloom and fruit set.

When planting time arrives, place your tomatoes in the garden 3 feet apart in full sun after the soil was enriched with a cup of slow release lawn fertilizer every 20 square feet. Watering with drip irrigation is best. Tomatoes are not xeriscape plants and must be kept moist. Fertilize again every month with a half-cup of fertilizer spread around each plant. Mulch with live oak leaves and watch for insects and mites.

I have always liked tomato cages made out of 6 x 6 inch square, 4 feet tall wire concrete reinforcing mesh. They are hard to find and difficult to make on your own. There is a new cage on the market that may be as sturdy but is much easier to use. Look for this square folding tomato cages at your favorite nursery.