

Tomato split

By Rob Smith

What to do when otherwise healthy fruit develops unsightly blemishes



Louisiana, the birthplace of jazz, can also be proud of its second-best contribution to the world – Tabasco Sauce!

My tomato crop – sounds grand but we are only talking about sixteen plants here – in a "glass" house and growing in NFT.

These were put into the system as six-inch high plants in the second week of September. As I write it is the first week of May and in a few weeks time it officially will be the first day of winter here in New Zealand. I have been picking fruit since Nov. 10 and, as will be seen from the photo, the vines are getting pretty long now!

Our deep freeze is filled – filled! – with homemade tomato and basil soup and the pantry is full of homemade tomato sauce, yet still the plants keep producing and, I can assure you, they will do so into the winter with no heating. While we get the very occasional frost, it's never severe. This, coupled with the buffer that the concrete floor and starter

walls provide – means the tomato plants will survive any short term real cold snaps.

The previous year I had to pull out cropping plants to make room for new plants and, looking at the condition of this season's plants I shall repeat the exercise again around September.

The plants are very clean despite the fact that nothing has been sprayed on them. One of the reasons for not having to spray is that while growing heritage plants may be good for the soul, the hybridisers and nurserymen of Europe have progressively bred plants, particularly tomatoes, that are all but resistant to known plant diseases. As long as you practice good housekeeping, the chances of disease problems are vastly reduced. The hybrid I grow comes from Holland and is named Taupo – a very popular cultivar here in New Zealand.

Because I am growing in a glass house with no automatic environment control other than roof vents controlled by solar-operated rams, when we do get a sudden change in the weather there is no real protection against harm to the fruit.

In a commercial situation, fruit would be picked much earlier than I pick mine I look to get 100 percent maturely vine ripened fruit for best flavor. Consequently at certain changes of the season I will experience a period of conditions where good sound ripe fruit will suddenly split because it physically cannot cope with the sudden surge in osmotic pressure brought about by the sudden change of climate – though, where I live, it is generally a change of pretty short duration.

Commercially this spoiled fruit couldn't be sold. At home it does not matter quite so



The length of the vines after seven and half months. The concrete helps to buffer the occasional cold snap – the fruit still looks great.

much, but the split fruit now needs to be used as quickly as possible before it starts going off. As can be seen in the photo below, there is nothing wrong with the fruit other than the cracked skin.

Once I've made the soup and the sauce there are not too many demands for several kilos of split fruit, so I have had to think of other ways of using them so as to avoid outright waste.

Some of you may know that in another life I am a musician. In Y2K performed at the New Orleans Jazz festival. I spent more than a week in "the city of dreams" and became well exposed to Cajun cooking. Tabasco sauce has been known in New Zealand for years but about the only use I ever heard for it was in making a Bloody Mary. A few days in N.O. changes all that, and after a week you get to a point where if a meal has not been embel-

ished with Tabasco, it seems extremely bland.

With that experience in mind, I experimented with various recipes from the pile of cookery books we have in our kitchen library for the treatment of good ripe tomatoes that happen to have split skin.

Eventually I gave up and started testing my own theories. It was not long before the Tabasco sauce came out of the cupboard.

I experimented several times with variations upon the theme (that's another thing in common with jazz.) I started by blanching the tomatoes, skinning them, dosing up the water with Tabasco sauce, salt and various other condiments, and then stewing in a saucepan.

Mmmmmnnn. Not bad, but as they used to say on your school report – "Could do better!"

Eventually I refined the cooking method to maintain the maximum flavor.

Here is my many times tried and proven method: First core the fruit, making sure not to puncture the skin on the opposite side. The idea is to allow the fruit to cook in it's own juices. Into the resulting well add salt to taste (1/2 tsp seems good to me) and a couple of

generous shakes of Tabasco into each fruit. Place them in a microwave-proof dish and heat on full power. When the juices start welling up, reduce to minimum power – 90 watts on my machine – and then let the fruit simmer away for about another ten minutes at this setting. You will need to experiment with that time based on the differences between dishes and ovens to make sure that the fruit is cooked right through.

I make my own bread, and toast made from this cannot be bettered. The cooked toms are placed onto the toast. In my case I then remove the skins, which now just about fall off (some may like to eat the skin and all – that's entirely your call) Then a little garnish – parsley, fennel, oregano and sometimes even fresh thyme all work well. A quick dusting of sea salt and ground black pepper and believe me – it's heaven.

A little story as an aside. When New Orleans jazzman Steamboat Willie was staying at my home I introduced him to the various ways of eating tomatoes (or "tum- mate -usss," as he would call them) within two days I had him completely hooked and now he views the fruit in a totally different way – almost lusts for them. 🍅

~ Bon appetit!

Rob Smith is a regular contributor to The Growing Edge.

While the skin may be cracked, the flesh inside is still good as long as you get to it quickly enough!



A tastier, healthier breakfast I cannot imagine!

