



## Tomatoes – The Legend of Louie

By Tammy Borden

I confess I'm not much of a vegetable gardener, although my appreciation is growing. I much prefer the delicate beauty of flowers and using them to design a stunning landscape. For some reason, a pepper plant swaying in the breeze doesn't bring me the same delight as that of the tender blossom of a bleeding heart or daffodil.

But then there is the tomato... Yes, I know, to the true botanists out there it's not technically a vegetable, but a fruit. Although, in 1887, the U.S. Supreme Court did apparently rule that it was indeed a vegetable. So *legally*, it seems, the tomato is not a fruit. Ah, but I digress.

For me, it's not the most attractive of garden plants, so that's not why I cherish it so much. And it's not so much that I even like the taste of tomatoes. I would much prefer a freshly pulled carrot after wiping the dirt off on my sleeve, or those sweet sugar snap peas plucked right from the vine. Yes, my love of the tomato runs deeper than my taste buds. My love of the tomato is because of love itself.

His name was Louie... a larger than life character. I remember visiting his house in early spring and walking through the narrow pathways formed in his garage that hadn't seen a car in years. Every possible space was filled with flats of seedlings. There were many kinds of plants that he intended to later sell out of the back of his rusty Volkswagen van at a nearby parking lot. The crudely written price signs drawn with a grease pencil on a sheet of notebook paper were his only marketing tool.

But his plants were legendary, and his pride and joy were his tomatoes: Early Girl, Jet Star, Beefsteak, Giant Pinks, and the list went on. He could tell you the unique characteristics of each variety – its flavor, color, shape, texture and size. I remembered his own small plot of land where he grew tomatoes that looked like something out of the Little Shop of Horrors. They were immense, with plants reaching the eaves of his house and tomatoes the size of musk melons.

Louie was my father-in-law, and I had the privilege of knowing him for more than 15 years before he went to that big tomato patch in the sky where there is no disease or blight – a comforting thought as I reflect on his battle with cancer and emphysema that eventually took his life. But his passion for the lowly tomato did not go unnoticed, and I have since taken on the challenge of continuing the tradition. Now, I am the one hauling flats of seedlings to share with friends and co-workers. Now I am the one saving seeds from his mystery Heirloom tomato – the one he always called "Giant Pink."

The tomato... When I pluck that first one from the vine I get an immense sense of satisfaction and nostalgia as I think of Louie. That's why gardening is so much more than a laborious task of weeding and pest control to me. Gardening for me is about relationships. Yes, much of my time in the garden is spent alone. But even in solitude I'm reminded of relationships – I can look at a plant and tell you who gave me a cutting of it, who I was with when I got it, who helped me plant it... As I look at the birds and butterflies I enjoy my relationship with nature and the One who created it all. And the lowly tomato – I can't look at one without being reminded of my relationship with Louie, whom some may have considered a lowly old man himself, but whose wisdom and beauty brought unbelievable flavor to my life. Those are the things that make gardening so meaningful and enjoyable for me. Those are the things of life.

*Continued...*

### **Louie's Top Ten Tips for Tomatoes**

1. Don't over water seedlings – let them dry out a little
2. Dry leaves – wet roots... always water seedlings from the bottom
3. Keep seedlings out of brisk winds
4. Use a 15-30-15 fertilizer
5. Plant the seedlings deep!
6. Use lots of compost
7. Sun! Sun! Sun!
8. They grow best in soil between 6-7 ph
9. Once planted, keep consistently moist
10. A little salt and pepper on a slice of Giant Pink – nothing better!