

# A Passion for Perfect Tomatoes

*"Tomato Lady"  
Amy LeBlanc, of  
Wilton, grows more  
than 300 varieties of  
organic tomatoes. She  
holds her plants to a  
high standard — and  
her customers to an  
even higher one.  
Do you have what it  
takes to pass her test?  
By Sally Noble.*



EVERY year, around about August, Amy LeBlanc ties up her four feet of gray hair with pins and baling twine, fills a few boxes with colorful, oddly shaped tomatoes, and makes the eight-mile journey from her Wilton farm to the Sandy River Farmer's Market in Farmington. There, she spreads out her red tablecloth, sets up her dried-flower arrangements, and brings out the items that people come from near and far to sample: homemade black ketchup, jellied garlic flowers, and of course, her remarkable tomatoes — all 300 different varieties of them. To finish the effect, Amy offers a fresh platter of juicy little chunks of produce, with toothpicks on the side, to facilitate tidy tasting. It's the kind of setup that makes observers salivate, but if you do decide to pause at her table, don't expect this queen of the Maine tomato to treat you like royalty.

"I'm not an hors d'oeuvres chef," she snaps, her blue-gray eyes flashing intelligently. "And sometimes, someone will give me a line — like 'Eeewww, this tomato's not red' — and then I really need to say, 'Oh, would you just shut up and eat it?'"

But she is not one to shun all feedback from the crowd. She constantly records consumer impressions, scribbling furiously on her clipboard of recycled scrap paper and muttering into the palm of her hand, where a tiny tape recorder preserves key observations. "Surprise," she whispers. "The Mini-Orange has about four bites. Perfect

tomato for slicing into a salad. Thick skin and really tart to my taste, but note: people at market are coming back for more."

Clad in her special "Organic or Die" T-shirt, Amy then angles her Leica "refractometer" in the sunlight, measuring the sugar content in one of her tasty tomato morsels. "Brixing at nine-percent soluble sugar," she muses, inviting questions as to significance.

Her intellectual fervor only partly explains her evangelical approach to spreading the word of this particular vegetable. Realistically, of the 5,000-odd varieties of tomatoes currently available, very few are sturdy enough to thrive in a typical Maine summer.

"Curiosity is an overriding thing — it can warp your whole life," sighs Amy. "And I'm a teacher."

Then, after her tomato performance at the Sandy River Farmer's Market, Amy LeBlanc retreats back to her private world: the 100-acre Whitehill Farm, with its five white tents and one clear-plastic, double-insulated greenhouse and a laboratory garden full of experimental tomatoes. Once down her driveway, the seclusion is absolute — only hayfields and layers of fog-shrouded hills complete the view from the green lawn fronting her home.

There she quietly, peacefully tends her crops, breaking her isolation for just ten days around Memorial Day, when she tolerates visitors — that's when her seedling-catalog customers come to pick up their custom orders. In this brief window of opportunity on Whitehill Farm,



*In August the farmer's market in Farmington is the place to sample Amy LeBlanc's colorful and oddly shaped produce.*

## BEYOND THE BEEFSTEAK Variations on a tomato theme.



Green Zebra



Black Prince



Mini-Orange Three Bite Cherry



Lime Green Salad



Garden Peach



Gold Oxheart



Sausage Paste



German Johnson



Green Grape Cherry



Earl of Edgecombe



Miracle Sweet



Black Plum Russian Paste



Speckled Roman Paste

signs directing traffic hang in her tomato-lovers paradise. People who speak the mysterious language of international vegetables swap tales of seeds rescued from sure extinction. Gardeners who share her fascination, like-minded souls, and plant devotees revel in her annual spring collection of organically nurtured seedlings, an assortment that also

includes peppers, pimientos, eggplants, herbs, and edible flowers.

**P**EOPLE have no choice but to make the journey to Whitehill Farm, since Amy never ships her highly rare and precious seedlings: fledgling plants grown from international seeds that were preserved, swapped, and

sold by dedicated farmers all over the world. Shipping, along with a Web site, would be too slick for her taste.

“Shipping is anonymous, and I want to get to know my customers,” Amy says. “This is not casual with me — and it’s never going to be casual because I invest enough of my self and energy into my seedlings that is personal.”

Amy grows varieties of organic vegetables that no one else in Maine offers — “memory” foods, old-fashioned versions of tomatoes, in particular. Her passion for the perfect tomato has been simmering since 1985, when she moved to Wilton with her telecommuting husband, Michael. Leaving their overcrowded Boston bedroom community in Hudson, New Hampshire, Amy came to Maine to make an extended-family home with her children and two parents, Andy and Frances, who had recently retired from teaching in Waterville.

“We dug millions and millions of grass roots out of a hayfield to make my garden,” Amy boasts. “And took three years to meet the clean-living, pesticide-free requirement for organic certification.”

Faced with Maine’s short growing season, Amy learned to experiment — while at all times keeping her organic principles intact. (Recently, for example, it took her three long years of innovation and persistence to find the perfect crack-free, dusky-red-purple Black Prince tomato, a variety from Russia, which is, of course, another place where hot weather is in short supply.) This is a woman with a fierce intellectual curiosity who boasts of being cranky and frankly exhorts those without her organic sensibility.

**S**O, after months of anticipation, Amy’s 180 or so pre-order customers eagerly pick up their cherry, beefsteak, and paste seedlings. Among them is Daryl Hoitt, a business professor who sells her crop to restaurateurs. Each year she eagerly loads forty big, empty Tupperware containers in the back of her Saab convertible and drives up from New Hampshire. “People who love plants, love plants,” she explains. “And anyone who loves tomatoes would just drool over Amy’s varieties.”

Connoisseurs already know that a green tomato has a nice tartness, a pink one offers a mild sweetness, while a black has a “deepness” that must be experienced to fully understand. Anyone who comes to know Amy LeBlanc will find her to be a passionate, if not slightly

obsessive, champion of the little-known varieties. On an impulse, for example, she might even slip a client an Earl of Edgcombe instead of a Golden Boy, because, really, “you’ll like it so much better.”

And about those black tomatoes, the ones that stop people at the farmer’s market in Farmington: completely misunderstood, she says. “Really, black tomatoes have a fine balance of sugars, and they tend to be firm and juicy, with a kind of musky overtone, a fruitiness,



*Amy’s first customers were the families of her music students. Teaching string instruments is a parallel passion of hers.*

too,” Amy argues. “Generally people love them once they get over the black part.”

Amy’s personality is another large part of the action at Whitehill Farm, particularly those ten days a year when customers are invited. “We savor her spunk,” enthuses Mike Nadeau, a long-time organic landscaper in Connecticut and

fellow member of the Northeast Organic Farming Association. For years now, he and his wife, Eddie, swing by Whitehill Farm every Memorial Day weekend on their way to a summer home just north of Skowhegan.

Nadeau fondly recalls the years when Amy gave him a Hogheart or else surprised him with a Green Zebra. Then he goes on to remember a darker time, such as when he brought the wrong friend to Whitehill Farm. “If someone who smokes tobacco touches her plants,” he explains, “she dispatches them right away for fear of the tobacco mosaic virus.”

**T**HE phenomenon of “heirloom” tomatoes — those with seeds passed down from one generation to the next — has seen growing popularity among vegetable aficionados. Chris Sorenson, who has a farm stand just outside New Haven, Connecticut, that caters to the just-outside-of-Manhattan crowd, met Amy at an organic farming seminar. His life was forever changed; where he once only grew plain-vanilla Burpee Big Boys, now he drives up every year for seedlings exotic enough to feed his hungry clientele. “I have all these doctors and lawyers who want something different, who ask lots of questions,” says Sorenson. “And the first time my Black Prince tomatoes from Amy’s seedlings came in, they sold right away. They’re ugly looking, but very sweet, very juicy. People tried these tomatoes just once and then came back early the next morning looking for more.”

Amy delights in converting new people to the better tomato — but always on her terms. She protects her crop with the same feistiness she extends to the animals she harbors on her farm: two cats, two donkeys, and a varying number of chickens. Teaching life lessons to teenagers is another of the Tomato Lady’s causes; peanut-butter-and-pickle sandwiches are always offered to the young people who work hard as her faithful assistants. Amy’s first customers, ten years ago, were the families of her music students, as performing the

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## Perfect Tomatoes

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cello and teaching string instruments is one of her parallel passions, along with certifying organic produce for the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). In the early nineties, as traffic flowed to and from her living room of musical instruments, visitors started leaving with a bonus lesson in Tomatoes 101. These relationships with families in the community hark back to Amy's pre-computer days — long before her husband revolutionized her records with his computer expertise.

"Now Amy notifies me with a postcard when my seedlings are ready," notes Jay Naliboff, a hobbyist gardener and obstetrician living in nearby Vienna whose three daughters studied string instruments with Amy over the

### ***Newcomers are first required to complete a form evaluated by the Tomato Lady for a sufficient level of interest.***

years. "Sometimes I think she might drive me off her farm if she didn't know me."

Amy prides herself on this exclusivity. When new people contact her, for example, she makes them work a bit before she sends out her catalog. "They cost me \$1.60 to mail, including first-class postage," she explains, adding that newcomers without a reference are first required to complete a form evaluated by the Tomato Lady for a sufficient level of interest.

"This weeds out a lot of people and manages my mailing list," she says.

Follow-up care also soaks up a lot of Amy's time — she continues to fuss about her tomato seedlings long after they've left her farm. Her following finds her no-nonsense advice on pest control, for instance, to be quite endearing. "Dipel DF just ruins the digestive tract of a hornworm," she advises. "But your

best bet is to pick the worms off when they're small."

Furthermore, she'll occasionally give replacements when something really goes awry. When a moose crushed Steve Sabin's new Gardener's Delight, Amy gave him a new tomato plant after he drove back to her Whitehill Farm for a heart-to-heart, one-to-one talk about vegetable gardening. "First I left her a voicemail message calling myself 'Number 39,'" chuckles Sabin, fondly remembering his days when he was just a new-order form. "She was so busy the first time I met her, she was talking to herself — I knew right then she was a free spirit."

In her off-season — long after her rare public appearances — she plows through the classifieds of obscure gardening publications, hunting for exotic seeds. While her garden lays frozen under ice and snow, Amy communicates feverishly with her fellow members of Seed Savers Exchange, an international association with American headquarters in Iowa. At times like this, Amy dreams of faraway tomato-tasting parties with people like Marianne Jones, of Heirloom Seed Ranch, in Dickson, Tennessee. Maybe next year she'll finally get to the annual TomatoFest with Gary Ibsen, in Carmel, California, she muses. As the wind whistles outside her greenhouse, she'll sip her herbal tea, casually thumbing through her reference library of tomato-history books, particularly the dog-eared copy of *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening: A Master Gardener's Guide to Planting, Seed Saving, and Cultural History*, by William Woys Weaver.

Then she looks out the window and savors the edible delights that will soon bring her farm, and her passion, back to life. "Tomatoes may be a marginal crop in Maine, but this is just part of the Everest that's gardening," says Amy. "Call it a delicious challenge — tomatoes never disappoint." □

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*Sandy River Farmer's Market is located in the Better Living Center parking lot, Front Street, Farmington. Open Fridays from 9 A.M. to 2 P.M. through October 31. 207-778-3115.*