

# Gender issues in the world of tomatoes leads one to the roses

Who did I plant this year?

What do Cosmonaut Volkov, Abe Lincoln and Paul Robeson have in common? One is a Russian space traveler, the second is the 16th president of the United States and the last is an African-American opera singer popular in the 1940s.

Besides being men, it would seem that they had nothing in common, unless you know that each is also the name of a tomato.

Of the nearly 5,000 registered tomato varieties, there are a few dozen that sport the names of people in the annals of history.

The growing season is well underway, so it's too late to come up with my own legends of history fantasy tomato patch this year, but we did plant Abe Lincoln and Boxcar Willie—both of which are growing beautifully.

Lincoln is easy, but who was Boxcar Willie? It turns out that Willie, the son of a railroad hand, grew up in a tool shed just steps from the tracks. He later became a famous Country Western performer and can still be seen crooning in places like Branson, Mo. As a tomato, Willie is reported to be very prolific, round and firm with a reddish-orange skin. A good slicing tomato for sandwiches. Abe Lincoln is a brilliant red tomato borne on clusters of up to nine 12-ounce fruits. This heirloom variety is considered to be one of the tastiest available. Both are delicious and getting somewhat out of control on their vines.

After studying this long list of tomato varieties, I've discovered that of all the tomatoes named after historical figures, few are named after women. I find this ironic, especially when one considers the old saying "Boy, she's one hot tomato!" It would seem that tomatoes are considered feminine. I've never heard a man called a "hot tomato," have you?

I'd love to plant a feminist tomato patch, but after studying the options, I'm not so sure anymore. Princess of Wales, Norma Jean and Evita Peron. Hmmmm. Notice that all of these women rose to fame amid controversy and died tragic deaths at a very early age.

Then there's Cleopatra, a cherry tomato, but again, looking for love in all the wrong places and death by suicide at a young age. My all-girl tomato patch is not looking promising.

So how do tomatoes get their names anyway?

According to T.J. Vinci, one of two vegetable product managers at Johnny's Seeds in Maine, tomatoes usually get "descriptive names," that would indicate size, color or shape.

One of Vinci's favorite tomatoes, which he named himself, is the "Pink Beauty," for its more-pink-than-red color and flawless skin. Other descriptive names are "Green zebra," a light and dark green striped tomato, and "Taxi," a bright yellow orb that is well suited to its name.



**Flotsam and Jetsam**

By Donna Drago

Other tomatoes bear the name of the place where they were bred. Like Bolseno, an Italian plum-shaped tomato that Vinci also considers among his very favorites.

Vinci says that varieties of tomatoes are bred around the world.

"When we get Asian varieties, we usually ask the company if we can rename them," Vinci said, noting that they have discovered that people typically won't buy tomatoes, or anything else they can't pronounce.

Registering tomato names is regional. Vinci says that the United States Department of Agriculture keeps the list in this country, but that there are separate databases of tomato varieties in Europe and Africa that he is aware of.

The easiest database to register a new tomato name, according to Vinci, is the USDA's, where you tell them the name and they check it against the database to see if there are any similar names already in existence. "If not, you're all set," Vinci said. So it would seem that any tomato breeder out there who was a fan of a historical figure could introduce a name and honor his idol with a namesake tomato.

Looking at the list of male names of tomatoes registered with the USDA, they all seem to be successful, or handsome, or have some other positive attributes.

I don't see any tomatoes named

after tragic male figures. No "Son of Sam," or "Sen. Larry Craig" or "Pete Rose," on anybody's growing list.

Hercules and Geronimo were warriors and leaders known for their strength and courage. Admiral Dewey was a hero of the Spanish-American War who lived to the age of 80. Adonis was adored by women and known for his beauty (full disclosure: he was slain by a wild boar). The only other U.S. President with his own tomato is Grover Cleveland, unless you count Jefferson Davis, who was president of the Confederate States.

The more I look at this, the more discouraged I am about my plans for a feminist garden.

Perhaps I'll stick with roses, where women like Dolly Parton, Ginger Rogers, Julia Child, Minnie Pearl and Lucille Ball are all the rage.

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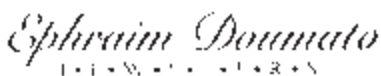
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