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# 'Ramapo' tomato makes a comeback

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco/For The Star-Ledger

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school Jersey tomato is poised for a big comeback.

The 'Ramapo' F-1 Hybrid, a strain of the state fruit that helped give Jersey tomatoes their good name in decades past, was reintroduced at about 80 farms around the state this spring and is coming to a farmer's market near you.

"Everybody's chomping at the bit," said Gary Donaldson of Donaldson Farms in Mansfield Township, one of the farms growing the 'Ramapo.'

There's only one hitch: You're going to have to wait a little longer than expected for your first taste of the 'Ramapo' in two decades.

Even as the harvest of other Jersey-grown tomatoes is under way, farmers say the chilly, wet spring delayed the season by a week to 10 days. That means the 'Ramapo,' a late-season tomato typically appearing in early August, won't be ready until mid-August.

But fans of 'Ramapo' -- who claim its balance of sweetness and acidity make it the "real" Jersey tomato taste that has all but disappeared from supermarkets -- say it will be worth the wait.

"The public has been waiting for tomatoes with flavor for a very long time," said Joe Musumeci of Eastern Seed Services in Pilesgrove, Salem County, which distributes 'Ramapo' seeds in cooperation with Rutgers University's New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station. "The promise is there and I hope that in a couple of weeks, when they start picking, their dreams are realized of eating tomatoes that taste like they did 20 years ago."

For Musumeci, the 'Ramapo' is more than just a sweet tomato.

In the late 1960s, Musumeci's father's farm in Woolrich Township, Gloucester County, conducted plot trials of 'Ramapo' for Bernard Pollack, the Rutgers plant breeder who developed it and named it after the New Jersey Native American tribe.

A high school student at the time, Musumeci kept Pollack's harvesting records.

But after a two-decade run as one of the state's favorite tomatoes, 'Ramapo' was tossed aside by large commercial growers in favor of tomatoes that were less tasty but didn't bruise as easily in shipping. 'Ramapo' seeds went out of circulation.

Then, about nine years ago, Peter Nitzsche, Rutgers' agricultural agent for Morris County, contacted Pollack -- now 88 and living near San Diego -- in hopes of reviving 'Ramapo' tomatoes.

"The only way to bring it back was to have the original parent lines. I was hoping he had them, and he did," Nitzsche said. "You need to grow plants and save new seeds every few years."

Pollack was pleased to help.

"It had the real good tomato flavor, which you don't find today," Pollack said.

Reproducing 'Ramapo' seed wasn't easy. The hybrid requires controlled pollination of its parents -- Abbie, named after Pollack's daughter, and KCA.

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pollen from the male parent and rub it on the female parent," said Jack Rabin, the associate director of farm programs at Rutgers' New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station in New Brunswick.

The American seed company Rabin initially contacted to reproduce the 'Ramapo' wanted a minimum order of 25 pounds of seed for \$50,000, but Rabin had only an \$8,000 budget.

Then, while clearing out a greenhouse destined for demolition, Rabin found a doctoral thesis written by Harry Paris, a respected breeder with the Israeli ministry of agriculture. Rabin e-mailed Paris.

"He remembered that Ramapo was a good tomato," Rabin said.

Paris suggested Genesis Seeds Ltd. of Ashalim, Israel, as a possible producer. Genesis produced four pounds of seed for Rabin's \$8,000.

"I thought we'd have enough for three years," Rabin said.

Rabin teamed up with Musumeci of Eastern Seed Services to distribute the seeds commercially. Rutgers handled requests from home gardeners. They sold out in three months.

Using those proceeds, Rabin purchased another six pounds of seeds for \$12,000. To date, 8,500 packets, which contain 30 seeds and cost \$4 each, have been sold to home gardeners in 43 states and as far away as Canada, the Virgin Islands, Italy, Poland, and Australia, said Cindy Rovins, agricultural communications editor for the Rutgers NJ AES.

"The goal is to get commercial breeders to look at it and see people want flavor and to breed flavor into commercial varieties," Musumeci said. "I think 'Ramapo' will live up to expectations."

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Posted by **doctorweird** on [07/16/08 at 10:30PM](#)

Be still my tongue. I can't wait for a real BLT made with Ramapo tomatoes and Schaller & Weber double smoked bacon, on rye bread of course. Mmmmm.

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Posted by **dontazmebro** on [07/17/08 at 7:22AM](#)

Got my dozen plants growing. They look great. Can't wait for real tomatoes to start coming in.