

# Washington Boro grower shares his tomato knowledge

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MOUNTVILLE — Washington Boro tomatoes are well-known throughout Lancaster County. It is these red ripe, succulent tomatoes that hit local markets before any other local tomatoes. Most home gardeners are still waiting for their small fruit to mature when the first of these early tomatoes hit the market, often in late June.

Martin Heisey is a man who knows about Washington Boro tomatoes, having raised them almost his entire adult life. At one time he raised 10,000 tomato plants on his Washington Boro Century Farm on Anchor Road. He has moved to smaller place and reduced his number to 225 plants, but still maintains pride in these delicious local treats.

His tomatoes, though now grown on soil outside the borough of Mountville, are still technically Washington Boro tomatoes,

because they get their good start in the greenhouse on his farm there, and that's what makes the difference.

Heisey says the real secret of the early Washington Boro tomatoes is that they are grown on the lowest elevation in Lancaster County. Martin says the elevation of most fields is about 240 feet above sea level, while at the harbor it is 220 feet above sea level.

The reason elevation is important, Heisey says, is that "the lower you go the warmer it is. The temperature can be as many as three or four degrees above the temperature elsewhere." Heisey says this is most starkly noted in the winter because snowfalls disappear more quickly in the area near the river.

This warmth takes on added importance in determining the frost killing dates in the spring and fall. "There is a slightly longer growing season. Two miles away



Martin Heisey unloads some of his fresh sweet corn at the market stand. Offering a wide variety of vegetables, Heisey specializes in the delicious Washington Boro tomato and seedless watermelons.



Darin Gerlach, 8, holds some of the Washington Boro tomatoes which his grandfather, Martin Heisey, grows to sell at the Columbia market. These tomatoes are the first of the season in Lancaster County.

from the river you can have a killing frost, and it won't affect that area." Also Heisey points out, "The nighttime temperature is two to three degrees warmer." Nevertheless he says with a smile, "The Washington Boro tomato is a myth. You can do the same thing away from Washington Boro." What it takes is a lot of extra effort, time and very early planting and transplanting.

Martin Heisey starts his seeds in his greenhouse about the 10th of February, then transplants them from seedling flats to gallon containers on April 10. He uses what he calls the "Cornell mix," which is one third peat moss, one third vermiculite and one third perlite. "You supply the nutrients," he says, adding that the exact nutrient suggestions can be obtained by contacting Cornell. "This method can save two weeks time," Heisey says.

By May 15, Heisey is ready to plant outside, and the clusters of tomatoes have already been set in the greenhouse. This is a big headstart on the average home gardener.

Heisey says he began growing his own plants in a greenhouse in 1958. "In the process of growing vegetables we were always disappointed in the plants you buy. If you grow them yourself you have only yourself to blame."

He smiles as he explains this, but states very seriously that plants cannot be held indefinitely as some



Heisey picks tomatoes on one of the 225 plants he raises to sell at market. He uses the Jet Star variety and stakes and suckers them.

greenhouses are forced to do. Holding back plants like cauliflower and broccoli causes them not to develop nor produce normally. He grows 7,000 plants now, selling to others. He once raised 40,000 for sale and his own use.

Once the plants are outside, Heisey recommends black plastic between the rows. On his Washington Boro farm he never used it, but in his new location he feels the added warmth it gives the soil is crucial. Heisey also said

there is no need to use herbicide with the plastic.

Last year Heisey picked his first early tomatoes on June 21, but this year he couldn't begin until July 1 because of the "cool, wet weather in the spring." Normally one can expect to find Washington Boro tomatoes plentiful by July 4, he pointed out.

The variety Heisey prefers is Jet Star because of their resistance to cracking. He ties them to stakes,

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Ruth Gerlach, Heisey's daughter, takes a tomato from a customer as she sells the Washington Boro delicacies at their Columbia market stand.

# Homestead Notes