

On Being a Farm Wife (and other hazards) Joyce Bupp



A new record.
Our garden has set a new record.

The first ripe tomato arrived just ahead of the first day of summer. Appropriate, huh? And, it bested our former record of early July by a good two weeks.

Actually, the tomato was a shade-on-the greenish side. A day or two spent hanging around the bananas in the kitchen-counter fruit basket coaxed it to a lovely ripe color and more fully developed that classic home-grown tomato flavor. Yes, it was quite tasty.

This early-ripe-tomato record is attributable to various reasons, most of them relating little to the grower.

The seeds of this tomato, called "Enchantment," arrived here mid-summer of last year, sent by a kindly reader who apparently shares a love of tomatoes. (Many thanks!) It's a plum-type, but grows slightly larger in size than the classic Italian plum variety often grown for simmering into thick, rich tomato paste.

Source of the seeds is a Maine company called Pinetree Garden Seeds, whose catalog followed sometime later. It's a homey, readable, catalog, filled with descriptions that sound more like a conversation between two die-hard gardeners than a sales publication. An order for some varieties of seeds I'd never seen anywhere

else — along with some standard favorites — went back in the mail soon afterward.

By mid-April, the largest tomato seedlings were ready to move outside in our early, warm spring. Since frosts a month later are not unusual here, we rolled out this season's second experiment. Wall-O-Water insulating devices have been around for several years, but these were the first for our garden.

"No way," I thought the day I lugged out the double-walled plastic devices fashioned into tubular cells in which water is poured and began setting them up. A dozen gallons of water later — two gallons per trip back to the basement — four of the aqua-colored, teepee-shaped, mini-greenhouses stood erect over black plastic mulch. Six-inch-high tomato stalks snuggled down inside each of the water-filled structures.

"What are those?" was the question asked by everyone who saw or passed by the garden, as the Wall-O-Waters became an instant conversation starter. At least once each day, I'd mosey back to the garden and poke a hand down into one of the plastic forms, fascinated at how much warmer the

atmosphere was inside the two-foot-high, water-filled shelters.

That lasted a couple of weeks, until the tomato stalks suddenly began poking thick stems out the tops. Another week, and they were beginning to look like jungle growth. How was I ever going to extricate the plastic covers from the tomato plants rapidly strangling them?

One sunny morning in mid-May, with infant, green tomatoes already dotting the stalks inside the plastic, it was apparent these things had to go before the baby fruits stewed. Squeezing the tubular cells between my hand, starting at the bottom, proved the best way to work the water out the open tops.

Until I got the hang of the tech-

nique, the sun-warmed water not only cascaded down onto the plants, but all over my arms, shoes, jeans and knees. When only a few inches of water remained in the bottom of each cell, the whole thing could be yanked off the plant and hung on the washlines to dry out for storage.

And, baby tomatoes ripened in record time.

The bell pepper experiment was another story. One pepper plant grown inside a fifth insulated shelter mushroomed in size and foliage, but set fruit very slowly. Meanwhile, the other unprotected ones, two-thirds the size, have been giving us good-sized, delicious peppers for a couple of weeks.

Go figure.

Moo-oo-ing for a milk shake? Southern Living editors found these terrific flavors when visiting ice cream shops in St. Louis: "All Shook Up" pairs peanut butter cookies and banana—Elvis's favorite snack—with vanilla ice

cream; "Cardinal Sin" marries sour red cherries with fudge sauce and vanilla ice cream; while "Fox-treat" is a quartet of raspberries, fudge sauce, vanilla ice cream and macadamia nuts.

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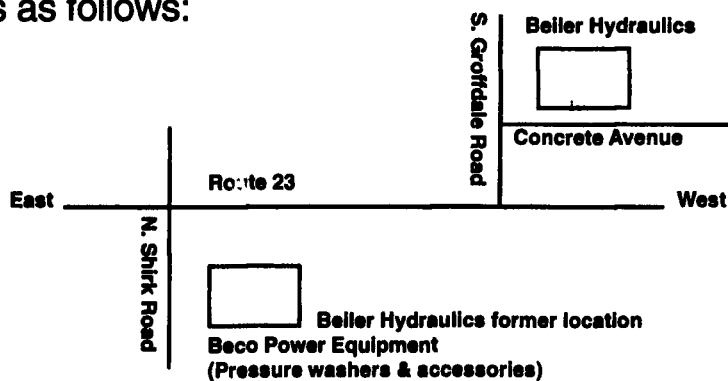
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