Trowel Talk

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Preserving Tomatoes

Rebecca Last

About twenty years ago, I discovered heirloom tomatoes. Ever since, I try at least a dozen different varieties each year. The great benefit of diversity in an uncertain climate is that at least one variety will do well. Most years, I have a surplus.

Lots of heirloom tomatoes.
R. Last

I preserve tomatoes four ways:

- freezing,
- dehydrating,
- cooking,
- and canning.

Freezing is easiest. You will need a cutting board, a sharp knife and some Ziploc® baggies. Cut out

the core around the stem end and any bruises or blemishes. Then score the fruit, cutting the skin from top to bottom. Fill the baggies with your tomatoes and squeeze out any excess air. Label each baggie with the date and contents and pop it into the freezer.

Tomatoes ready to freeze.
R. Last

When you are ready to thaw out the fruit, you can squeeze out the juice and reserve it to drink or use it in a sauce or risotto. The rest can be added to soups or stews. The scored skins slip off much more easily than blanching the fresh fruit before it is frozen.

Dehydrating tomatoes is almost as easy. Dehydration preserves most nutrients, while dramatically reducing storage volume. You will need a sharp knife, a cutting board and a drying rack. I use a dehydrator that has its own drying racks. You can also use your oven, if you are confident its thermometer is accurate. Mist the tray or drying rack lightly with cooking oil to prevent the fruit sticking.

After washing your tomatoes, remove the cores and any blemishes. Cut them into slices of even thickness. I like thicker slices – about a half centimetre, which takes about seven hours to dry. You may prefer thinner slices that will dry more quickly and be crispier. Try to make your slices the same thickness so they will dry at the same rate. Even cherry tomatoes can be sliced and dehydrated.

Prepping tomatoes for dehydration.
R. Last

Dehydrated tomatoes.
R. Last

Fruits and veggies need to be dehydrated at ~57°C

(135°F). Don't try to hurry the process. A too-high temperature will result in 'case hardening' – the outside of the fruit dries nicely but it remains gooey inside, creating a perfect environment for harmful bacteria to breed. Check your tomatoes every hour or so. You'll know they are ready when you can squeeze a slice between your fingers, and it feels firm with no moisture seeping out.

Remove your tomatoes promptly from the oven or dehydrator and place them into an airtight container. For the next week, shake the container daily to ensure the slices don't stick together and that any remaining moisture is distributed evenly throughout. Your "sun" dried tomatoes will last two-three years in a cool dark spot. You can soak them for an hour or two to partially rehydrate them before use.

My third preservation technique is **cooking**. You can cook tomatoes fresh or freeze them first and cook them later when the weather is cooler. Every year, my husband uses part of my harvest to make a huge batch of spaghetti sauce. A slow cook recipe like spaghetti can reduce the nutrient content of the tomatoes by as much as seventy percent. However, there are lots of other healthy ingredients. The resulting sauce is frozen into two-person portions, making it an easy meal.

You can cook surplus tomatoes in many ways. As with any frozen product, be sure to label containers with the date you froze it and what's inside. **Note** that frozen raw veggies or raw meat can be refrozen after they have been cooked.

Finally, there is **canning**. Our tomato chutney recipe is a family secret, but you can find lots of chutney recipes online. The key is to follow the recipe faithfully. Sterilize jars either by placing them in boiling water for at least five minutes, or for larger batches, place the empty jars into the oven at ~108°C (225°F) for about twenty minutes.

I recommend using old-fashioned mason jars. While you can re-use the glass jars and the screw rings, the disc portion of the lids must be new and needs to be boiled hard for about five minutes to activate the rubber seal. A good canning recipe will likely contain a mix of sugar, salt and acid – usually vinegar, but perhaps also lemon juice. These ingredients are preservatives, so it is crucial to follow any directions precisely. While tomatoes have some natural acidity, it is usually not enough to preserve them.

Homemade tomato chutney.
R. Last

When the tomatoes are cooked, pour the mixture into hot, sterilized jars. Leave about a centimetre of "head space" between the level of the cooked mixture and the top of the jar. Place the newly boiled disc lids on top of the jars and secure them with the screw rings. The screw rings should just be finger tight. Allow everything to cool for a few hours. During this time, you may hear popping noises, indicating that your jars are sealing. When jars have cooled, test them by gently pressing on the centre of each disc lid. If it moves, your jar is improperly sealed. Set these unsealed jars aside and place them in a double boiler to be reboiled for 5-10 minutes or until the lids do not move when pressed.

If reboiling fails to create a good seal, put the improperly sealed jars into the fridge and plan to eat them soon. Jars should be labeled and dated before storing in a cool, dry place.

Ask a Master Gardener

Compiled by Amanda Carrigan, Agnieszka Keough

Master Gardeners answer helpline questions.

Many of my carrots I grew and dug out recently have a netting of tiny roots growing around the main root, which itself is often forked. Several had very woody cores and a couple plants started to bolt. I grew carrots in the same sandy soil before and never had this problem. What is causing this? Could it be the result of the prolonged heat and drought we had? I also noticed that the tiny roots had small bumps on them - could it possibly be a disease? How can I prevent this from happening next year?

There are different reasons your carrots could have had hairy roots and some of the other symptoms. You may have to think about their actual growing conditions and decide which option or options are most likely and then work on correcting the issue next season. The good news is that unless they are also woody, hairy carrots are perfectly fine to eat, although you may want to pare them or scrub off the hairs first.

Possibility 1: Large numbers of fine roots growing off the main taproot could be due to an excess of nitrogen in the soil, caused either by applying fresh manure while the carrots were growing, or using a fertilizer with too much nitrogen in it.
Solution: use well-composted organic matter for fertilizing, and perhaps move the carrots to a different site next season; plant a nitrogen loving crop (such as broccoli, corn, or lettuce) in their old space.

Possibility 2: Hairy roots, as well as some forking, can also be caused by drought stress, as the taproot seeks water in different directions. Stress and heat can also cause some carrots to bolt, or flower, in their first year.
Solution: more deep, even watering, and a mulch of something light-weight and cool, like straw.

Possibility 3: Hairy roots can be caused by an infestation of root-knot nematodes, which can also cause branched roots, thickened skin, and irregular bumps or galls on the carrots.
Solution: crop rotation. Another disease that can increase root hairs is aster yellows, which will also result in stunted roots and affect growth pattern of the greens, and may result in the carrots flowering in the first year.

Possibility 4: Older carrots can also get hairy, so this could happen if your crop was planted early and/or harvested late. Older roots might also be more prone to bolting or woodiness, as these are normally things that would happen in the second year.

I am new to Ottawa and when I bought a small fig tree (fruit-producing, not houseplant) in a box office store I assumed I could just plant it outside. I found out later that they are not hardy here, but that I could possibly overwinter it. What is the best way to do it?

Ottawa is definitely near the limit of where you can expect a fig tree to survive outdoors. You would need to offer some protection from the cold - even the hardiest figs will often die back to the root over winter in Ottawa and have to regrow the next year, so while they may form figs, the fruit doesn't have time to ripen. To a certain extent, your tree's survival will depend on the variety of fig. Chicago Hardy is probably the best known variety for surviving cold temperatures, but others including Brown Turkey, Celeste, Olympian, Teramo, Florea, and Campaniere have been reported to survive -10 to -20°C. If you are planting the fig outdoors, choose a sheltered spot, and once the leaves

fall and the weather turns cold, wrap it well with burlap for the winter, or make a chicken wire cage around it and fill the cage with leaves or mulch. You could also grow the fig in a pot, and bring it indoors for the winter – not necessarily in the house, but in the garage perhaps, where it is somewhat warmer and the fig is protected from weather. If you don't have a place to move it indoors, you can also dig a trench in the garden after it gets cold but before the ground freezes and lay the tree (in its pot) down carefully, then cover it with a good thick layer of mulch.

Those Wonderful Flies?

Nancy McDonald

This month's article on insects is about flies and includes a question mark in the title as I am not sure everyone will think of them as wonderful. Words like unpleasant, annoying, gross and disease-spreading may more readily spring to mind when describing flies. Growing up on a farm, with flies in the barn, around the manure piles, a constant reminder from my mother was "*Close the door, you'll let the flies in.*" I long considered flies a pest and it has taken years before recognizing they are a critical part of the ecosystem.

Flies have been around for an exceptionally long time, about 260 million years, even before the dinosaurs roamed the earth, which means they also experienced "pesky" flies. We still have primitive varieties of flies resembling those first ones such as mosquitoes, gnats, black flies, and midges. Mosquitoes come up in the U.S. Centre of Disease Control list as the deadliest animals on earth because of their ability to function as vectors for disease. This article in no way minimizes that flies spread disease. But there is more to their story.

Flies are members of the order Diptera which means they have one pair or two wings. Even though dragonflies have the word "fly" in their common name, they have two sets of wings and are not a true fly. Let us examine the beneficial roles of true flies in our ecosystems.

One of their main roles is as decomposers. We may think of the larval stage as "icky or gross," but this is when maggots from blow flies and flesh flies break down dead tissue, fecal matter, and decaying plants, returning nutrients to the soil. Without these detritivores, organic debris would accumulate and vital nutrients for plant growth would be lost. They really are the unsung heroes. New commercial applications are emerging in Canada with black soldier fly larvae used to break down organic waste into protein-rich products. These products have been approved by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency for use as animal and fish feed.

A second role often overlooked is their usefulness as pollinators, especially in colder climates. They pollinate many plants, including those less attractive to bees, and are crucial for fruit crops like apples, pears, cherries, and members of the carrot family in Ontario.

Syrphid fly on monarda leaf
Nancy McDonald

Syrphid flies, seen daily in my garden, are also known as hoverflies or flower flies and pollinate crops worldwide in their adult stage. We have over four hundred species of hoverflies in Ontario, and they can easily be mistaken for bees or wasps. In addition to being valuable pollinators as adults, in their larval stage they prey on pests such as aphids, scale, mites, mealy bugs, thrips, and others. We thus get both pest control and pollination from these beneficial flies. They vary in size from 4 -25 mm long. I am now noticing the smaller ones and marvel at how they can hover in mid-flight like hummingbirds.

Other flies are also predators or parasitoids, meaning they help with pest control. For example, in your garden, you are likely to find long-legged, robber and tachinid flies.

Long-legged fly on hemerocallis
Nancy McDonald

The metallic colour of a **long-legged fly** often catches my eye as it perches on a leaf. A fun fact is that the long-legged fly male is attractive to the female because of his long legs! In addition to gaining a female's attention, he often must present nuptial gifts like thrips, aphids, small larvae, or spider mites to seal the mating deal. The long-legged fly is a predator in both larval and adult stages.

Robber flies are also called assassin flies and if you have a chance to observe them in action, you may witness them capture their prey in midair. They can be as large at 38 mm and with their bristly bodies may have you ducking away. They are protein eaters only, so will not damage your plants, They hunt pests such as Colorado potato beetle, Japanese beetle, aphids, and leafhoppers. However, if hungry, bees and butterflies and other good guys will be on their menu. It is a bug-eat-bug world after all! Look for them in action in the sunnier spots in your garden where they easily find prey.

If you happen to see a medium-sized fly resembling a house fly with dark bristles over its body in your garden, you have found a **tachinid**. Like the robber fly, it is not pretty or found on posters raising money for an ecosystem campaign, but it should be. In the adult stage, it is an important pollinator as it goes flower to flower in search of pollen or nectar. Every one of the 8,000 species of tachinids worldwide has a parasitic larval stage when it will feed on common insect pests. The female tachinid lays her eggs on a host exterior or on a leaf near a leaf-munching pest. Tachinids use caterpillars, beetles, and grasshoppers as hosts. The hatched larvae burrow into the host's body, consuming and killing it.

Most of us have experienced **Japanese beetles** in our gardens and are aware of an introduced tachinid, the **winsome fly** (*Istocheta aldrichi*), a natural predator. A white dot on the thorax of a Japanese beetle indicates an egg has been laid. Refrain from dropping that one into soapy water. As the egg hatches, the larva penetrates the body of the Japanese beetle and will consume it. Our Master Gardener of Ottawa-Carleton Facebook page has had members reporting they have seen these parasitized beetles in our area and that is a good thing!

The fourth vital role flies fulfill involves their place in

the food web. They are a high-protein food source for animals including birds, bats, spiders, and other insects. They are prolific in producing offspring because evolution has proven that most of them will be eaten.

As a gardener, you can mitigate and reduce potentially harmful mosquito populations by changing the water on bird baths daily. Also adding movement to these water sources will attract birds while discouraging mosquitoes. Refrain from using pesticides in your garden as they will harm the natural predators of mosquitoes as well as the many beneficial flies that do not spread disease.

Regardless of how one chooses to describe flies, their beneficial roles are notable, and a decline in their population would negatively impact ecosystems. It is time to recognize their important roles as decomposers, pollinators, predators, and food.

Native Shrub: American Hazelnut— *Corylus americana*

Heather A. Clemenson

The American hazelnut, also called the American filbert, is native to Eastern Ontario and is one of about 20 edible nut species native to Canada. It is a deciduous shrub that is a member of the birch family. The name 'corylus' comes from the Greek 'korylos', meaning a helmet, which describes the shape of the husk or bracts around the nut.

Indigenous uses of this shrub were many. Hazelnuts were a food source, eaten raw or cooked, and used in traditional medicines. Hazelnut shells and wood were used for dyes. The pliable twigs were good for basket making and the wood was also used for drumsticks and fuel.

Hazelnuts are a valuable food source being high in Omega 3 fats and various minerals and vitamins.

Description:
The American hazelnut is a multi-stemmed, medium sized shrub found as an understory plant and at woodland edges. It can grow from two to five metres tall with a spread of from three to four metres and forms a dense rounded shape at maturity or, if left to spread through suckers, it can become a dense thicket. It is a fast-growing shrub and can start producing nuts within two to three years.

It is adaptable to a wide range of growing conditions. Some authors state that this shrub grows best in part shade while others say it grows best in full sun. According to commercial growers, however, it produces a better crop of nuts if grown in full sun. The shrub prefers dry to moist well-drained soil.

The bark is a grayish-brown and smooth when a branch is young, becoming more textured as the shrub matures. The dark green simple leaves are arranged alternately on the stem and are oval to egg-shaped, somewhat heart-shaped at the base, with finely serrated edges. The leaves turn a variety of colours in the fall, ranging from yellow to orange to reddish purple.

American hazelnut leaves
Heather A. Clemenson

The American hazelnut is monoecious, bearing separate male and female flowers on the same plant. While some authors imply that the plant is self-pollinating, others suggest that it may require cross-

pollination from another hazelnut to produce nuts. Though one shrub will produce some hazelnuts, two shrubs will ensure that both will produce a better crop.

The male catkins begin to develop in late summer and remain dormant throughout the winter. In early spring, over a two-to-three-week period, they emerge in clusters near the tips of branches in response to warming temperatures. The catkins are pale yellow-brown structures that vary in length from four to eight centimetres. The numerous flowers on a catkin each contain four stamens. The catkins shed their pollen in early spring, a process that attracts pollinators like bees, though pollination is also wind assisted.

The female flowers are rather inconspicuous, emerging in early spring before the catkins. They are much smaller than the catkins and form tiny bud-like clusters near the branch tips. A spray of red stigmas emerges from the bud. After pollination, the small female flowers develop into ragged-edged bracts or husks, containing hard-shelled nuts, in clusters from two to six, that mature in late summer and early fall.

Catkins and female flowers
Melissa McMasters , https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hazelnut_(25333137603).jpg, CC BY 2.0

American hazelnut nuts with bracts
Heather A. Clemenson

Maintenance:
American hazelnut is a low maintenance shrub that does not need regular pruning. It can, however, be pruned to control its shape and overall size. Any pruning is best done in late winter or early spring prior to the emergence of new growth. The shrub does send out suckers which can be removed to control its overall appearance.

Once established, American hazelnut is considered drought tolerant. To help establish a strong root system, it should be watered regularly during the first year after planting.

Pests and Diseases:
American hazelnut is considered to be quite resistant to pests and diseases, though it can be susceptible to damage by filbert worms, aphids, hazelnut gall mite, and Japanese beetles. Filbert worms are the most significant insect pest for hazelnut trees as they can damage the developing nuts. Filbert aphids can cause sooty mold on leaves inhibiting photosynthe-

sis. In all cases, serious damage can be avoided at the early signs of the problem by pruning out and destroying infested and infected buds and leaves.

Many hazelnut varieties are susceptible to Eastern filbert blight, though the American hazelnut is considered somewhat resistant to this fungal disease. The fungus infects immature tissue on actively growing shoots and can result in cankers over a year after infection. Cankers appear on branches and may girdle and kill the limb. Infected shrubs may exhibit dieback of twigs and branches. Cutting out infected twigs and branches can help reduce the spread of the disease. Filbert blight does not affect hazelnut leaves or nuts.

Garden Uses:
American hazelnut can be considered as a shrub with seasonal interest throughout most of the year with attractive foliage and catkins in the spring, and nuts and colourful foliage in the fall. It is best grown in a garden where it can spread. It can also be pruned to use as a screen or hedge.

American hazelnut is an important shrub for a diversity of wildlife. It is therefore considered a keystone species in North American ecosystems. The dense foliage is attractive for nesting sites and cover for wildlife. Hazelnuts are a very popular food source, not only for humans but for a wide range of wildlife. The nuts attract a variety of birds including blue jays, woodpeckers, bobwhites, ruffed grouse and turkeys, as well as squirrels and chipmunks. The catkins provide late winter food for ruffed grouse and turkeys and white-tailed deer. White-tailed deer browse on the foliage during the spring and summer and the twigs in the winter. The foliage is also eaten by rabbits. The shrub is also a valuable host plant for many species of butterflies and moths.

Cultivars of American hazelnut include 'Purpleleaf Bailey Select' described as a unique variety with dark purple foliage that turns a burgundy colour in the fall. This shrub is slightly more compact than the native variety growing to both a height and spread of 2.5 metres.

Looking at many gardens in the Ottawa area, I have seen very few hazelnut trees used as an ornamental shrub. A friend in Quebec has two hazelnut shrubs, both of which are very productive, though there is a fall battle with wildlife as to who can harvest the nuts first!

Birch - The Tree of Life

Adair Heuchan

Note triangular markings on majestic Paper Birch at the Montreal Botanical Garden 2025
Adair Heuchan

For the Anishinaabeg people, the Wiigwaasabak– the birch tree – is “the tree of life”. Its bark, sap and wood provided the essentials for life to the First Nations and helped the first European arrivals to survive in the wilds of the North American continent. Birch bark was one of the essential elements of Indigenous engineering, science and culture, which helped to build the Canada we know today.

The birch bark canoe is as much a symbol of early Canada as the beaver. The light-weight but durable canoes were essential for fishing, the fur trade, and early travel in Canada. Birch bark was also used to cover structures, woven into twine, ropes and mats, and formed into baby cradles. It provided the material for writing, for canvases and for containers such as baskets and boxes used for storage and transportation of food and other goods.

Given that it has a high resistance to cracking, birch was and is to this day prized for traditional snowshoes, paddles, drum frames, toboggans and handles for knives and axes. Birch and poplar are the favoured food of beaver and are therefore used in beaver traps.

Birch bark has anti-fungal properties which helps to repel pests. The bark, leaves and roots are used as teas and salves for medicinal purposes. The sap, when reduced, is a sweetener like maple syrup but tasting more like molasses. The wood is exceptional for kindling and fuel.

Birch bark also supports many forms of artistic workmanship. One famous art form is called "Birchbark biting". Anishinaabeg, including Ojibwe people, Potawatomi, and Odawa, as well as Cree and other Algonquian peoples of the Subarctic and Great Lakes regions of North America, undertake this art form whereby the artists bite on small pieces of folded birch bark to form intricate designs. These beautiful creations cover containers, clothing and jewelry.

Respect for nature is fundamental to Indigenous practices of sustainability. Knowledge keepers understand and pass down the knowledge of how to tap the trees and how to remove the bark so that it regenerates. Birch sap and bark are harvested in the spring when the sap flows and the bark is the thickest. Care is taken not to take too much bark in order to safeguard these valuable resources for future generations.

The birch symbolizes resilience, hope and truth and is depicted in Anishinaabeg stories as a protector and provider of vital resources. Birch trees are seen as guardians of rivers and lakes.

The importance of the birch tree continues today, as one of the top "keystone" plants supporting insects, birds and animals which are critical to our survival. Ottawa is in Ecoregion 8, Eastern Temperate Forests. Here the birch tree, Betula, is amongst the top keystone plant genera hosting 284 species of butterfly and moth caterpillars. It also provides food for hare, deer and moose who browse young birch in forests all year round. Unfortunately, insects such as the bronze birch borer and birch leafminers, can damage and kill birch trees within a short time. Birch is also sensitive to pollution.

Distinctive bark coming off in paper-like sheets. Dam Lake, Quebec, October 2025
Ross Heuchan

Fortunately, we have lots of birch trees, such as the paper birch, *Betula papyrifera* and our native yellow *Betula alleghaniensis*. In addition, the grey birch, *Betula populifolia* has a small native range limited to

the easternmost part of Ontario. The river birch, *Betula nigra*, is a non-native birch which is used in garden and park plantings all over Southern Ontario.

The **white birch**, **paper birch** or **canoe birch**, ***Betula papyrifera***, is widespread across Canada and the northern United States of America. It is the provincial tree of Saskatchewan. The bark peels away in large paper-like strips and when used in canoes or basketry, the inner bark faces outwards. It is a fast-growing tree, one of the first to grow after wildfires. It is short-lived, 50-70 years on average and not very tall (24-25 meters in height). White birch is not used on a wide scale commercially, so it is not generally disturbed. It is still harvested by First Nations as noted above. White or paper birch is also an excellent tree for ornamental planting in large gardens and parks. There is a beautiful specimen in the experimental farm arboretum.

Adair Heuchan beside yellow birch-Montreal Botanical Garden 2025
Ross Heuchan

Yellow birch, also known as **golden or swamp birch, *Betula alleghaniensis***, is the largest and longest living birch in our region. Yellow birch is slower growing, excellent hardwood and therefore used for flooring, furniture, cabinet work, doors, veneer and plywood. It is an important source of hardwood lumber in Eastern Canada and the provincial tree of Quebec. Yellow birch grows well in parklands and on streetscapes provided it doesn't face an extended drought. There is a magnificent specimen in the Central Experimental Farm Dominion Arboretum .

Note the small clump typical of river birch -Montreal Botanical Garden 2025
Adair Heuchan

The **grey birch, *Betula populifolia***, and **river birch**, also known as the **black birch, *Betula nigra***, are both small, fast-growing trees which thrive in full sun and colonize disturbed, dry and poor soils (pioneer species), though they can adapt to various moisture levels. The grey birch features slender, triangular leaves with long, pointed tips. River birch tends to grow in clumps with pale pink and brown/gray coloured bark and lots of curled paper scales. ❀

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Helplines are monitored daily.
Send questions and photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for identification.

Trowel Talk can be found on the Lanark County Master Gardener's blogsite and Ottawa-Carleton Master Gardener's Website https://mgottawa.ca/

Article suggestions box

This is your chance, as a reader, to suggest an idea for an article you would like to see in Trowel Talk. Click on the button.

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Banner Photograph: . *Liatris spicata* 'Floristan' seed head

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Clinics

Ask a Master Gardener, face to face gardening questions.

Market locations can be found on the calendars of the Lanark and Ottawa–Carleton websites

Will be resumed next season

Talks and Events

Vines of All Kinds for Vertical Interest and More
Mary Reid
Thursday, October 16, 7:30 pm
Nepean Horticultural Society

Fall Fling - Preparing the Garden for Winter.
Mary Reid
Monday, October 20, 7:30 pm
Royal Canadian Legion, Branch 353 Eganville

Taking Care of your Gardening Tools
Gerda Franssen
Tuesday, October 21, 7:00 pm
Smiths Falls Horticultural Society

How to select Bulbs for Spring flowering and More
Mary Reid
Tuesday, October 21, 7:30 pm
Stittsville Goulbourn Horticultural Society

What's Bugging You? Integrated Pest Management for your Garden
EP Power
Tuesday, October 21, 6:30 pm
Gloucester Horticultural Society

Berries and Fruit Trees
Mary Reid
Monday, October 27, 7:30 pm
Gatineau Valley Gardeners