

It's a matter of choice. Every spring, when the gardening season begins, I am always amazed with the many new varieties of veggies, flowers, shrubs and trees that are available. Although many of the newer varieties show significant enhancements, I sometimes get the feeling the industry does this as a matter of economics. For us consumers, this constant flow of new creations can instill the mind-set, "Out with the old and in with the new."

Sometimes the enhancement is geared more to aesthetics than to genetics. Appearance is important when it comes to sales. Brighter colors and showier plants attract consumers. Remember a few years back when the topsy-turvy planter was introduced. The concept was growing produce such as tomatoes or strawberries upside down, in a hanging planter that claimed to make harvest easier while at the same time creating a unique look.

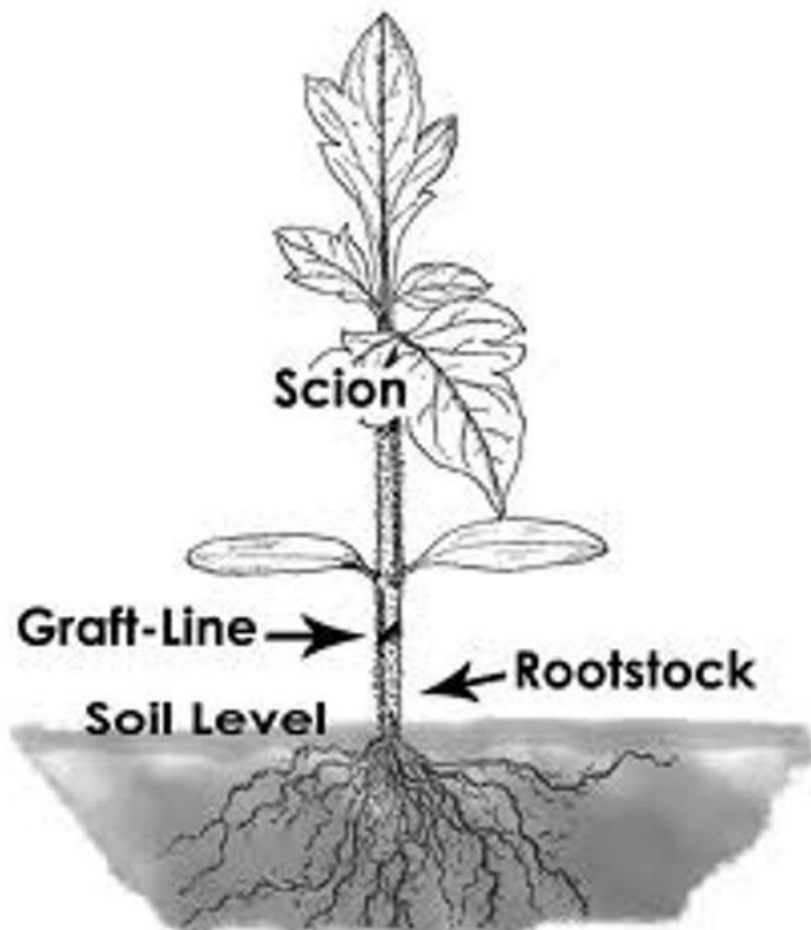
Today, I'd like to address a new development that has been geared more toward genetics than aesthetics. As a matter of fact, I recently heard it advertised as one of the biggest things to happen with gardening in the past 20 years. This accomplishment again involves tomatoes.

Most anyone who has grown tomatoes for any length of time is familiar with the phrase heirloom tomato versus hybrid tomato.

For those not familiar, heirlooms are those varieties that have been reproduced for generations without crossbreeding because of their valued characteristics. Generally, heirlooms are open-pollinated by Mother Nature. If a seed is harvested from an heirloom tomato and planted the following season, the offspring will be genetically the same as its parent. Many heirlooms date back more than 100 years. To the tomato connoisseur, nothing beats the flavor of an heirloom tomato. Heirlooms are claimed to be the sweetest and best-tasting tomatoes on earth. Unfortunately, heirloom tomatoes lack a genetic mutation that gives them a uniform color and appealing shape. Somewhat grotesque and prone to cracking, most heirlooms lack disease resistance. As a result, heirlooms are a bit more challenging to grow.

Since the early 1940s, plant breeders have been developing what are called hybrid tomatoes. Hybrids are crossbreeds between two different varieties achieved through human intervention. Hybrids were developed primarily to produce more fruit that is aesthetically pleasing, uniform in color and retains a longer storage-life. Most hybrids possess a remarkable disease resistance. As a result, hybrids are more frequently cultivated both commercially and in the home garden. Unfortunately, as a result of all this crossbreeding, most hybrids lack the exceptional taste that heirlooms

deliver. Furthermore, if you were to save the seeds from a hybrid tomato and plant them the following season, they would likely grow; however, there is no guarantee the offspring would genetically resemble the parent.



Some experts estimate there are up to 25,000 tomato varieties from which to choose. We now have another choice. Imagine a tomato plant that combines the legendary taste of an heirloom with

the traditional high yield and disease resistance of a hybrid. It is called a grafted tomato. The process is simple: an heirloom top or scion is spliced onto the hybrid's rootstock. The resulting plant looks like an heirloom and delivers awesome heirloom flavor, yet it performs like a hybrid.

With grafted tomatoes being a new creation, the jury is still out on their success. The concept certainly sounds exciting to me. I plan to give them a try. My biggest concern now is a matter of choice. Which do I select?