

# Shelton-Mason County Journal - Dedicated to the citizens of Mason County, Washington since 1886

## Green tomato blues

Peninsula Permaculture · September 24, 2020 · Page A-10



By Alex Féthière

*Photo in the print edition:* Green tomatoes can be almost as good as ripe – and less ephemeral. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

An abundant garden is a wonderful burden. You have all you need for your salads, stews and side dishes, and to share with your friends and neighbors. At a certain point it becomes a chore, particularly when the weather has not obliged you with conditions for ripening.

This is routine for tomatoes on the Olympic Peninsula. Start them in greenhouses well ahead of planting and use varieties likelier to mature in our short summer, but chances are you'll be stuck with some adolescents when fall tinges the air.

You might have tried fried green tomatoes, which are delightful in moderation and don't keep at all. What to do with the pendulous bounty that remains?

Lactofermentation, the production of preserved foods using wild lactobacilli and brine, is thousands of years old. It was supplanted by pickling in the industrial age when vinegar became cheap and widespread. The ease and consistency of results with vinegar has made it the preferred method, but I prefer the probiotic magic that takes place in traditional ferments.

Lactobacilli abound in the environment, including on the vegetables in our gardens. Several beneficial strains have been isolated and cultured in labs, including *Lactobacillus acidophilus*, *L. brevis*, and *L. bulgaricus*. There is even a *L. kimchii* that specifically appears in the Korean ferment, kimchi. (Fun fact: kimchi is of such cultural, gastronomic and health importance to Koreans that in 2008 a Korean astronaut was sent into space on a Russian mission with specially engineered "space kimchi" that could survive the artificial environment.)

Lactobacilli are in the group of health-enhancing bugs we call probiotics. The health benefits of probiotics are legion, such as lowered serum cholesterol, improved gastrointestinal function, an enhanced immune system and lower risk of colon cancer. I could spend the rest of the column listing them, but what matters here is that lactobacilli make tasty green tomato ferments.

Before proceeding we should dispense with concerns about solanine and tomatine. These toxins are said to exist in all parts of tomatoes, including the green fruit, and to cause a number of uncomfortable symptoms. Historical consumption in Peru, from where tomatoes hail, and the learned advice of New York Times food science writer Harold McGee suggest that little caution is warranted. I have never

experienced anything other than joy, but if you're concerned start with a couple of bites and work your way up.

Harvest a few pounds of mature green tomatoes. A half-gallon Mason jar holds 2 pounds. Slice and cube them about 1 inch thick and dump them in the jar(s). For every pound, use 3-5 teaspoons of salt to make a brine. I use three, but I'm sensitive to salt, and many people prefer a saltier tomato. Higher salinity also decreases risk of spoilage.

Dissolve the salt in lukewarm water and pour over the green tomatoes to cover. I think cracked black pepper is an essential seasoning, but also add black cumin and will try sliced garlic this year.

This is the tricky part. Tomatoes, even when green, contain sugars that encourage yeast growth. Kahm yeast is a harmless but yucky beaded film that scums over ferments and makes them mushy. The yeast readily grows on exposed pieces and contaminates the batch, but has a harder time establishing on brine. To prevent this, keep the tomatoes submerged with a clean rock, saucer, ferment weight (glass or ceramic), or stainless-steel spring used on the excellent "Trellis & Co." line of products.

Failure to submerge is probably the most common cause of mold or yeast contamination. If you want to stack the deck in your favor, put a diced cabbage leaf and either a little burdock, sunchoke or bull thistle root (only because we all have it on our land) in there too. The cabbage provides extra lactobacillus cultures and the roots provide inulin, a prebiotic that they love to eat. A friend who ferments puts a tablespoon of whey in too — I've found that works well in making beet kvass.

Cover with cheesecloth to keep out critters and let stand at 70° for a week. The result should be a jarful of crispy, sour, zippy tomatoes that will keep in the fridge for up to nine months.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at [onlandist@gmail.com](mailto:onlandist@gmail.com).*