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## The Last Tomato of Summer

My desire to eat vine-ripened tomatoes from my garden left me with growing pains

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There are some things in life that you never get tired of, no matter how many times you experience them. Train whistles, fireworks, lunar eclipses, rainbows — they retain their original thrill. That also applies to a just-picked, vine-ripened tomato. With its cool interior and sweet-acidic juice, there's nothing better to eat on a hot summer day.

Summer isn't summer until I satisfy my craving for this divine food of the gods.

To that end, I decided last June that I would grow my own tomatoes. My backyard is small, but there's a sizable patio. And so, along with pots of marigolds, daisies and basil, I added a Big Boy tomato vine. I decided, rather than start from seed, to adopt a foot-high plant from Home Depot.

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I was determined to be a good farmer. I potted my vine in organic, nutrient-rich soil. I bought a wire cone to stake it — a yellow one, just because I like the color. I dutifully watered it every day during this hot, rainless summer.

By mid-August my plant was tall and leafy. Baby green tomatoes hung on its vines like ornaments. I told all my friends not to make plans for Labor Day. I was going to have a cookout on my patio. There would be tomatoes for all. Farmer John's juicy homegrown Big Boys!

Turns out, though, I wasn't such a good farmer after all. The week before Labor Day, my tomatoes had turned red, as they're supposed to. But when I inspected them up close, they had deep cracks in their skin, like the lines in Clint Eastwood's face. Their undersides were brown and squishy.

I immediately did a Google search on tomatoes. Talk about a mixed message: The "cracking," as it's called, is caused by not watering the plant enough. Their discolored bottoms are the result of a condition called "blossom end rot," which is caused by too much watering. The cure for both conditions, I read, was adding lime to the soil. But you're supposed to do that before you plant the tomatoes in the dirt.

I picked the rotten tomatoes off the vine. I was frustrated, but not entirely defeated. There were a few green tomatoes on the plant that hadn't cracked or rotted, at least so far. I still held out hope of getting my vine-ripened tomato fix. But even if those tomatoes turned out to be winners, they wouldn't be ripe in time for my end-of-summer cookout.

"I'm still determined to have my tomatoes, and I will," I told a friend of mine who grew up in

Minnesota.

"Good luck," he said.

Being new to Minnesota, I wasn't aware of how short summer is. "After Labor Day, the temperatures drop," he told me, "and by mid-September we often have frost."

I awoke the day after Labor Day to realize that my friend knew what he was talking about. In just 24 hours the weather had changed dramatically, from hot and muggy to cool and brisk.

But then, 24 hours later, summer returned in full force, as if it had taken a sick day. Temperatures climbed into the mid-90s, perfect for tomatoes.

Because it was too hot to work inside my house, I moved my computer to the patio. At one point I glanced over at my tomato plant. There, in the middle of it, obscured by leaves, was a gorgeous red tomato! To me, it could have been a ruby, it seemed so precious.

I reached in and twisted it off the vine. It was warm in my hand, and firm. There were no cracks. It felt as smooth as a river rock. I immediately took it into my kitchen and put it on a square, green plate. I sliced it, salted it and put some fresh basil leaves on top. I poured myself a glass of iced tea that was steeped with mint from my patio garden and sweetened with honey from the local farmer's market.

It would have been nice to serve my friends a bushel of tomatoes on Labor Day. But this tomato was all mine. I ate it outside, savoring every bite. No tomato ever tasted better.

On Wednesday the temperature dipped again. Over the next week, the remaining green tomatoes didn't get any bigger or turn red. I picked them and brought them indoors, where they've yet to ripen. But it's okay. Fall officially begins on Saturday and tomato season will have passed. I had my perfect tomato. I fulfilled my seasonal eating thrill.

It's time to move on to new cravings. The supermarkets are already filled with bags of Halloween candy corn, something I can never resist. I know it's artificial food and not good for you, but candy corn doesn't crack or rot. You don't have to worry about over- or under-watering it. And there's always plenty to go around.