

BEST



Its stripes and distinctive color are apparent from the fruit's first appearance until harvest.

T O M A T O ?

We nominate 'GREEN ZEBRA'. With its zingy flavor and distinctive color, it has clearly earned its stripes.

by MELANIE HAIKEN | photographs DANIEL PROCTOR

I was first introduced to 'Green Zebra' tomatoes a few years ago, served in a garden-fresh salad by my younger sister Claire. It was hard not to be immediately intrigued by this jewel-like variety, with its greenish amber surface and flesh bisected by stripes of deep forest green. Looking back, I'm amazed at how long it took me to grow 'Green Zebras' myself—and what a snipe hunt it became when I set out to do so.

In fact, this pseudo-heirloom's rise to prominence has been so



Tangy not tart: a unique taste treat.

Seven steps to tomato success

1. Unless your local nursery has very eclectic tastes, you'll most likely need to start your 'Green Zebra' from seed. Plant seeds indoors six to eight weeks before you plan to transplant them (it's safe to plant tomatoes outdoors two weeks after the last frost). Almost any container with a drainage hole will do; cell packs and peat pots are fine (as are cardboard milk cartons; just sterilize them with a diluted bleach solution first). Use a sterilized soil mix, and water it before planting seeds $\frac{1}{4}$ inch deep, two or three to a pot. Place the pots in a warm

place, then move them to a sunny windowsill once the seedlings appear. Thin seedlings to one per pot.

2. "Harden off" the seedlings by exposing them gradually to the outdoors. The first day, put them in a shady location for a few hours; increase the exposure over several days, until leaving them out overnight. **3.** Tomatoes prefer rich, well-drained soil with a pH between 6 and 7, so prepare your soil with plenty of organic matter, such as peat moss and chicken manure. **4.** These tomato vines grow fast and large, so it's best to leave at least



Rebecca's reminder

When should you pick the fruit? A 'Green Zebra' takes about three to four weeks to ripen, and its firmness remains constant from start to finish. Pick tomatoes before the calyx (the leafy cap, left) starts to turn yellow, at which time it's already getting late.

recent that it's not yet exactly a household or a nursery name. Developed in 1985 by Tom Wagner, a plant breeder in Bakersfield, California, 'Green Zebra' has emerged from obscurity in the past few years. And it didn't hurt when Alice Waters included an enthusiastic description in her *Chez Panisse Vegetables*. The burst of fame has taken even its creator by surprise. "It's got a lot of pizzazz—and a unique flavor," says Wagner, adding that when he first introduced 'Green Zebra', growers showed little interest.

COMPLEX, DELICIOUS FLAVOR

The heritage of 'Green Zebra' is complex, and Wagner is reluctant to reveal his secrets. But he does allow that he bred the popular heirloom 'Evergreen' with five or six different

lines, most of them rare novelty heirlooms he chose for their vigor, appearance, and taste. He estimates it took no less than 15 generations before he realized the final result.

Its value as a conversation piece aside, 'Green Zebra' is winning converts for the simplest of reasons: Its flavor is addictive. Unlike most of the bewildering variety of tomatoes available, which tend to fall at one or the other end of the tart-sweet spectrum, 'Green Zebra' manages to be both at once, without sacrificing either. Considered a high-acid tomato, it's far from mouth puckering but has enough bite to distinguish it from so many of the sweet tomatoes.

GROWING DEMAND

While 'Green Zebra' may not be easy to track down (see "Ordering 'Green

Zebra' Seeds" below), it's simple to grow—quite hardy and disease resistant. I was successful the first time I planted it, with few of the frustrations of split skins and blossom rot that I've had with other varieties.

Although 'Green Zebra' won't keep your entire neighborhood in tomatoes all summer, it's a reasonably prolific producer, and the fruits are consistently a good size and of high quality. What's more, they turn out continuous waves of silver-dollar-size fruit until the first frost, meaning that you—like my sister Claire—will be able to wow friends with your salads for a stretch of several months. ✦

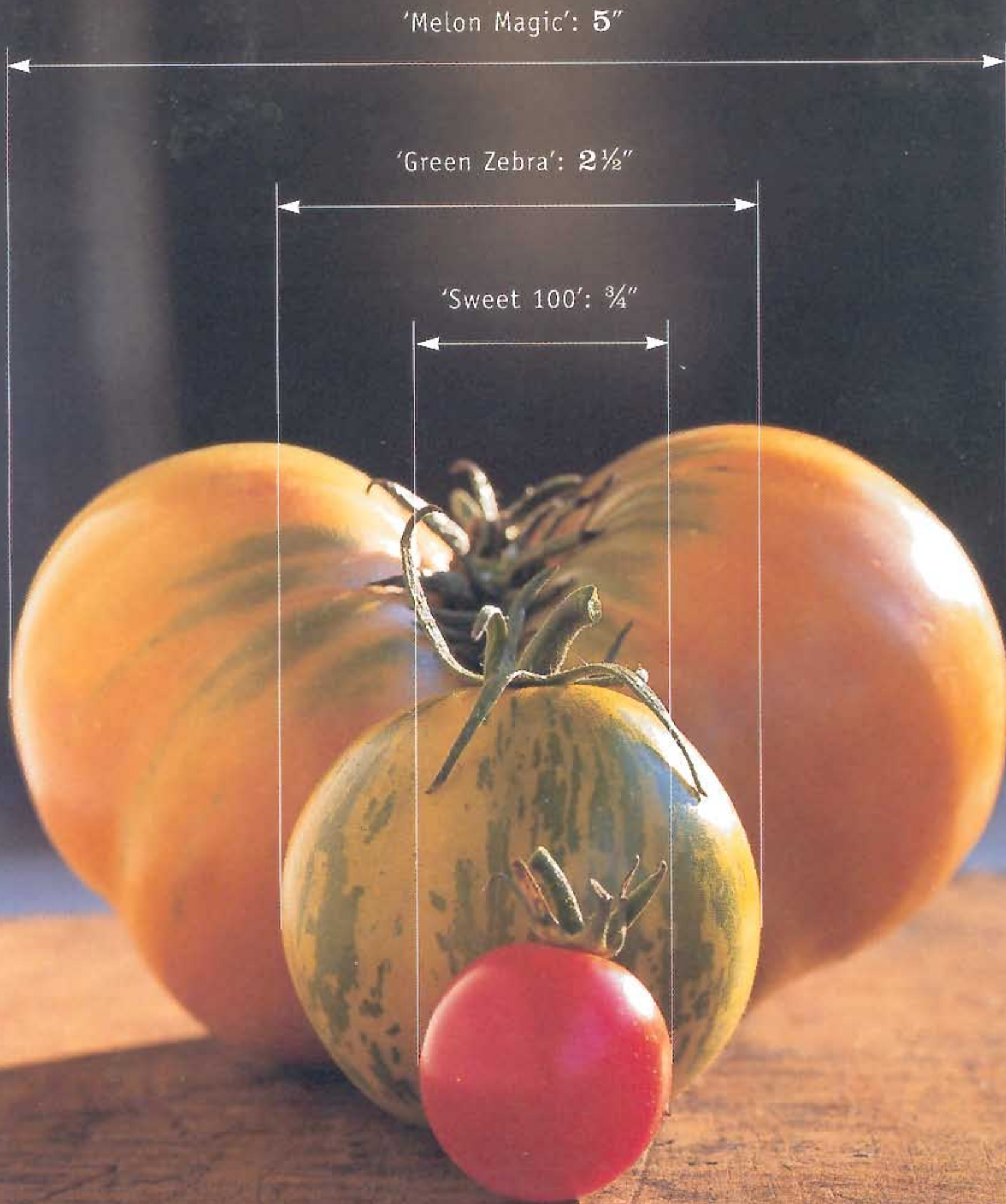
Melanie Haiken, managing editor of San Francisco magazine, is an avid gardener.

3 feet between tomato vines if you're planning to use stakes or cages, 4 feet if you're going to let them grow unsupported. **5.** Set plants deeply into the soil, as tomatoes can root from the buried portion of the stem, and this will ensure sturdier plants. It may seem too early, but by setting up cages or trellises at the time of planting, you'll be more likely to avoid damaging delicate roots later. **6.** Tomatoes need deep watering (8 to 10 inches down), so build up soil in a ring around the stem to create a basin. Mulch well to keep moisture locked in and to protect roots from temperature extremes. **7.** Feed tomatoes with a general-purpose fertilizer every three to four weeks during the growing season. Ratios of 10-10-10, 5-10-10, or 5-10-5 are best, as too much nitrogen—the first number—leads to lots of green leaves and paltry fruit.

Ordering 'Green Zebra' seeds

TOMATO GROWERS
SUPPLY COMPANY,
Fort Myers, Florida
941/768-1119

THE COOK'S GARDEN
(CATALOG)
London Derry, Vermont
800/457-9703



'Green Zebras' run on the small side—typically weighing about 3 to 4 ounces. Though larger than cherry-style tomatoes (at 1/3 ounce), they seem tiny compared with beefsteak-style fruit (at 8 ounces to 1 pound).