

## lore and legend

One only has to look at the origins of its name to tap the rich vein of lore and legend that surrounds the tomato.

Long ago in the 2nd century AD, the famous Roman physician and medical researcher Galen had written about a poison bait ball used on wolves that he described as being like a “wolf peach.” In 1753, the Swedish botanist Linnaeus gave the tomato its botanical name by placing it in the nightshade genus *Solanum* and calling it *Solanum lycopersicum*. It is believed the tomato reminded him of Galen’s “wolf peach” description and in Latin *lyco* means “wolf” and *persicum* means “peach.”

To complicate the tomato’s reputation, old German folklore maintained that deadly nightshade was used by witches to summon werewolves. As a member of the same genus *Solanum*, tomatoes (with similar looking but larger fruit) were also suspect, and the use of *lyco* in the botanical name seemed to confirm the fears.

For these reasons, tomatoes were viewed with suspicion when first brought to the Continent and they were grown as ‘ornamentals’ for decorative purposes only.

Legend has it that wealthy people became sick after eating tomatoes because the acid in the tomatoes reacted with the lead in their pewter plates. Since the poor (who ate on wooden plates) did not get sick, tomatoes became known as a poor man’s food. The fact that tomato plants have a weak stem that often sprawls over the ground also perpetuated their ‘low status’ as a food.

Up until the end of the 18th century, physicians warned that tomato seeds caused appendicitis and that tomato skins stuck to the intestinal walls and caused stomach cancer.

Although historians question its accuracy, legend has it that in 1820, the prominent Salemite Colonel Robert Gibbon Johnson ate an entire bushel of tomatoes on the steps of the Salem Courthouse in New Jersey to prove they were safe and not poisonous. His public grandstanding purportedly attracted a crowd of over 2,000 people who came to watch the suicidal act. They were disappointed... the good Colonel lived.

The tomato fruit does contain low levels of a toxic alkaloid called tomatine. Levels of tomatine are higher in the leaves and stem of the tomato plant, and also in green, unripe tomatoes.

Originating in America, the tomato was spread around the world following the Spanish colonization of the Americas. It is likely that the first tomatoes were yellow since the Italian and Spanish words for them were *pomo d’oro* or “golden apple” (as in *pomodoro*, still the Italian word for “tomato”). The French later considered them to be an aphrodisiac and called them *Pomme d’Amour* or “Love Apple.”

### more tomato lore

- If you place a large red tomato on your windowsill it will scare away evil spirits.
- Hanging dried tomato leaves in a window will keep away winged insects.
- If you place a tomato over the hearth it will bring prosperity to the house; a tomato skin placed over your door will bring money within four days.
- Using tomato juice on your hair will cause it to grow faster and using tomato paste on your hair and scalp will help stop hair loss. There are now several shampoo brands available which include tomato ingredients.

