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Life lessons, taught by tomatoes.

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The tomatoes have been generous this year. We harvested a slew of cherries, including sungolds, sweet millions, and a bounty from one sturdy volunteer in the compost pile. It reminded me that it was one of our favorites last year?a teeny, lemon-colored bunching yellow. We also got a basketful of bigger Brandywines and green zebras. (Apparently I was too busy eating them to take any pictures.)

We picked every tomato that showed any promise at all before hurricane Irene blew through. That was a good thing: Most gangly branches were stressed?and several snapped from the wind and falling pine boughs during the storm. Most of the bigger fruiting plants went south after that. There were a lot of them.

Still, I'd picked A LOT of tomatoes. The shallow bowls full of fruits in every stage of ripening stared at me. I felt guilt when I couldn?t (or wouldn?t) deal with them. So, my family held an intervention. This year?s garden was big, to be sure. It included the usual frustrations of woodchucks and bed construction and whole zones of heavy clay. But what I realized, through some prodding, is that manageable = enjoyable.

We decided to limit ourselves next year to only the things we know we grow well and are easy to gather?and process. I realize that too many tomatoes makes me feel bad; I can?t keep up with the pruning, the staking or the harvest. And the *smell* of rotting tomatoes makes my hair stand on end. So I plan to plant fewer of the winners. For us, that amounts to 10. (I totally neglected many of the 32 we grew this year, hanging out near the stakes, below.) I?ll be able to really prepare for and nurture them, and I know they?ll be healthier and more productive for it.

I even have a plan for next season that I can start right now. I read in Barbara Pleasant?s amazingly useful book,
Easy
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to Make, Build, and Grow: 200 Do-It-Yourself Ideas to Help You Grow Your Best Garden Ever [1]" href="
http://www.typepad.com/site/blogs/6a010534a389ba970b010534aa6ffe970c/pos... [2]" target="_blank">
Easy Garden Projects to Make, Build, and Grow that one of the simplest, low-maintenance ways to fertilize and prepare your tomato bed is as easy as this:

- Remove the plants that were growing in the bed where your tomatoes will be next year. (By crop rotation mandate, they shouldn?t return to the same bed, if you can help it.) Turn the soil by hand and mix in an inch or two of compost, old leaves, grass clippings or other soil amendments.
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Find yourself some hairy vetch [3] seeds, sprinkle some there as a cover crop, and walk away. This perennial legume will take hold, outpace annual weeds in the spring, and fix nitrogen in the bed that your plants can use later.

- A week or two before you plan to put out your tomatoes, cut down the vetch with a sickle or shears. Leave the tops of the plants lying *right there* to break down and slowly release nitrogen back into the soil.

- Cut 12-inch holes right into the vetch bed (leave the roots in place everywhere else), and plant your tomato transplants in the holes. Mulch right around the seedlings with old hay, straw or eelgrass (my aim for next year). That?s it.

My mind was pretty much made up. But I was utterly convinced after reading about [4] this strategy's surprising benefits at the Rodale Institute, near Kutztown, Pennsylvania (home to the 30-year-old Farming Systems Trial) [5]. It's the longest-running U.S. study comparing organic versus conventional farming techniques, and researchers there have dabbled in several cover-crop combinations as alternatives to black-plastic mulch for growing food. They found that a fall-planted rye or rye-vetch mulch not only choked out weeds, it mulched the soil (no straw necessary), *and* it boosted yields.

Plants that sustain themselves? Um, that makes perfect sense to me. I?m off to rip out spent plants and turn over soggy soil. (It's been raining for days here.) While I'm at it, I'll try to remember what these fruits of my labor have taught me: Do less, better.

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