

Tomato Smart

Current science teaches us that this (perhaps illusory) intelligence is the product of a careful, nearly eternal process of evolution. The fundamentalists prefer that everything was designed and then created about 6,000 years ago and that all the evidence for evolution, such as the dinosaur bones, were placed in our path by a fiendish god who just wanted to fuck with our minds. Either way, and not withstanding Dr. J. Gould's notions of sudden genetic explosion (happening over millions of years), we should not have the performance of sudden adaptation given by the tomato plant on our back porch. Now let's not get silly. Tomatoes still don't sing or dance or play musical instruments. Also, our tomato plant was not specially bred or genetically selected for its virtues. In fact, it was arbitrarily selected from a dirty wrack at HomeDepot.

What is special about our tomato plant is what suddenly happened to it when it arrived on our back porch. Historically speaking it first sat on our front porch for a week before it was finally transplanted. Talk about fiendish: we had bought one of those \$9.99 contraptions "as seen on TV". We thought it would be cool to harness the poor plant upside down and then wait until its tomatoes came cascading down for picking into our salad. The device is basically a bag-like plastic pot with a 2-inch hole in the bottom. The young tomato plant is inserted through the hole and a kind of 2 by 1/2 inch thick spongy disk with a slot in it is slid along the base of the stem on the inside of the pot so that the plant won't fall out and so that the water, which will be poured in over the soil that contains its young roots, will not simply drain out the hole. Once this operation has been completed, taking care not to damage the main stem or any of its branches, the container is inverted and potting soil is added above the tomato plant's original root bulb.

The contraption is next hung from something in the sun. We were warned to add water each day lest the plant dry out. With this fear in our bones we check several times a day that our plant is not wilting for lack of water. At first, we fear for it as it does seem destined for wilting. But after a few days... poof! Health and deep green return!

The tomato plant has learned to cope with its environment! The issues that had concerned us and which we were confident about overcoming had to do with water. The question we had not posed had to do with sunlight. We assumed that by setting the inverted plant in the sun, it would, we imagined, live off the light that reflected upward to its chlorophyll processors from circumambient surfaces. Wrong! The tomato plant simply inverted all its leaves so it could take in the sun directly.

The question then turns towards the source of such inspiration. Certainly the tomato plant is a domesticated version of a plant that lives, or at least lived in nature. We could estimate that the number of people who wanted to grow tomato plants upside-down have not been legion and for that matter, these tomato plants would not have survived as the fittest even if they had reproduced, as no one could tell if they would have preferred to hang upside down or not, given their dissemination to the wind. Even if this cultivar were to produce bigger and more abundant tomatoes, I'm not sure the cultivator would repeat the same silly inversion the next year. This said, it would seem there was no genetic chance in Hell that this adaptation would pass back into nature.

So there is a problem: how did this tomato plant solve the problem since in no natural case would the leaves find themselves in an inverted position, as it is most improbable that nature needs the tomatoes to be bountiful, luscious and cascading. Darwin established long ago that any cultivar, if left on its own will revert to a natural state, resembling a humble, scrawny and discolored weed.

The only explanation that comes to mind is that the tomato and the vine are genetically related. The vine's understanding of how to turn its leaves toward the sun apparently remained dormant for millions of years until "As Seen on TV" summoned it to our back porch.