

# The Humble Tomato: Fruit or Vegetable?

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**T**oday I'm hoping to lay this age-old question to rest. There's a short botany lesson involved, but it will be fun – I promise! Just stick with me, and I'll explain why the answer to the question in the headline is *Yes*.

Yes, a tomato is a fruit. And *Yes*, a tomato is a vegetable. It just depends on what lingo you're using, because where people get confused on this issue is at the intersection of Kitchen-Talk and Science-Speak.

In the science of botany, the word "fruit" means something very specific – it's essentially a synonym for ovary. A fruit is a plant part that contains the seeds of the plant, after developing from a flower. Obviously, in this sense of the word, a tomato is a fruit.

Other examples of fruit, in the pure botanical sense of the word, might include apples, peaches, and cherries. (No surprise there!) Also, cucumbers, eggplants, melons, beans, and squash. They are all ovaries, and they all contain seeds.

You may be surprised to learn that the seed pods of flowers like poppies and lilies are also considered fruit, botanically speaking.

In the same vein, acorns are the fruit of the oak tree.

And when you blow on a dandelion for amusement, do you know which part of the plant is floating away in the breeze?

Yup, our botanist friends tell us it's the fruit that's attached to that tiny parachute, and each fruit contains a single seed that will grow into another dandelion.

**B**ut here's the thing – the science of botany assigns no meaning to the word "vegetable." This is where it gets tricky. Some folks erroneously believe that foods like lettuce, turnips, and celery must be vegetables because they don't contain seeds and therefore are not fruits. Not quite true!

Botanically speaking, edibles are always defined *by the part of the plant they come from*. So, within the science of botany, cabbage and spinach would be classified as leaves. The edible part of celery and rhubarb is defined as the stalks, or stems. Carrots and radishes are root crops. And tomatoes and peppers are a part of the plant known as the fruit.



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**Are you catching on? Basically, it's a trick question** to ask if a tomato is a fruit or a vegetable, because the two words don't exist in the same lexicon. There is no "vegetable" in botany – only fruits, stalks, leaves, roots, and tubers. "Vegetable" is purely a culinary term.

And in the kitchen, I think it's most natural to differentiate fruits and vegetables in terms of the sweet and the savory. Who wants a tomato for dessert? In the garden (or the botany lab) a tomato may be a fruit. But when it's on the menu, it's clearly a vegetable.



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