This 101-year-old scientist may have created new favorite tomato

Plant pathologist Maureen Gallogly developed the first blight-resistant tomato in 1963. Tax waiting list for his new variety is already in the thousands.

By Ashley Simpson
June 10, 2025 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

Mary Ann Gallogly, 101, Maureen Gallogly's daughter-in-law, in a room she built in her apartment in her family's Greenbelt home on Kenilworth Avenue. (Courtesy Gallogly family)

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MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — On a morning in late May, a group of volunteers gathered at West Virginia University's Organic Research Farm in Morgantown, a rippling plot of land northwest of campus. For the next three hours, as an emery donkey scrunches in the valley below, seven pairs of muddy boots trek back and forth across the field, stretching black plastic sheeting, folding with irrigation lines and tucking tomato seedlings into the ground.

But there is one pair of boots missing.

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You may not have heard of Maureen Gallogly, but chances are you've eaten one of his tomatoes, and perhaps even grown one in your garden. More than 60 years ago, Gallogly bred the first tomato that could stand up to Phytophthora infestans, otherwise known as tomato blight. The West Virginia 76, sometimes called "the people's tomato," is still a root vegetable beloved and beloved around the world, grafting gardens from Alabama to Africa.

This year marks the first time since years that Gallogly, who moved into a nursing home after falling ill in the spring, has missed the annual planting. Back then, the seedlings were sown in the garden of nearby Huttonsville Correctional Center, where inmates provided free labor.

This morning's planters are a mix of graduate students from WVU's Davis College of Agriculture — where Gallogly worked for 28 years — and volunteers who have known the plant pathologist for decades. Gallogly developed these more hardy tomato varieties since 1963, each of which has claimed a spot in this year's field, including his latest and likely his last.

After the college published the release of the tomato, called Maureen's Mignon, earlier this year — 2025, that is was fine for any West Virginian who wanted seeds, per Gallogly's insistence — WVU's greenhouse manager Without Gallogly came to work the next Monday morning to find 2,000 email orders waiting in her inbox, a number that far outstripped availability.

Many of the tomatoes being planted this morning will provide seeds to fulfill those requests.

Until very recently, Doddling held out hope Gallogly might make it to the organic farm for the occasion. A few weeks beforehand, when she visited him in the nursing home, planting seedlings was very much on the centenarian's mind. "We got to get those tomatoes in the ground," he told her.

"Every year, even last year, he's been out there on the soft soil, out there in the heat, walking around, right there with us," she says. "I really don't know how he does it."

Humble roots

The son of a carpenter and a school dietitian, Gallogly grew up in the rural southeast corner of Arkansas. "We were pretty poor people," he says. During the Great Depression, his parents grew cotton on rented land, where Gallogly logged the first of many hours spent walking between crop rows.

A teacher from Future Farmers of America inspired Gallogly to attend college, and a Sears Roebuck scholarship made it financially feasible. After earning his bachelor's degree in botany from Ouachita Baptist University, he moved to the University of Wisconsin to get his master's in plant pathology, working on a rice disease called white tip.

"That was my favorite month," he recalls. "I had a new job, I had a new wife, I had a new baby." He also had a new three-acre research farm on the grounds of the nearly medium-security prison, where he could conduct trials on plant diseases, including tomato blight.

In the years following, Gallogly's fields swayed with potato and tomato plants of all different varieties. Then disaster struck. "The disease farmers and gardeners feared most" arrived, he says late blight. The pathogen leaves ugly brown lesions stretching across the leaves, stem and fruit until the plant looks like it's been blasted with a blow torch.

That year, Gallogly lost nearly his entire crop of tomatoes to late blight — except for a few wild varieties with tiny fruit that showed a curious resistance to the disease.

'The people's tomato'

Gallogly's tomatoes spread out on a three-acre field, and I walked every row, looked at every plant," he says. "Then I'd pick a ripe tomato, slice it, and taste it." If the tomato didn't pass the taste test — regardless of how disease-resistant it seemed — he threw it out.

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Doddling says that of the 2,000-seed orders she received last winter for Maureen's Mignon, many came with a personal note, "especially about the 'big. There are a lot of out-of-state alumni who are missing a taste of West Virginia."

A lifelong pursuit

Gallogly retired in 1988, but that didn't stop him from coming into work every day.

"Even in the lunchroom, it always came back to Phytophthora," says Mark Doddle, a retired WVU plant pathologist and a volunteer at the planting in May. "I don't care what we were talking about, Phytophthora was just in his blood."

In 2008, when he was 84, Gallogly published a seminal book on Phytophthora. He also continued to breed tomatoes.

In 2017, he released the West Virginia 76, known as the Mountaineer Pride, and the West Virginia 176, or Mountaineer Delight. Both tomatoes were bred using West Virginia 76 as the parent fruit and boasted resistance to late blight as well as to Septoria leaf spot, a defoliating disease that exposes the fruit to sunburn. Gallogly, however, wasn't wholly satisfied with the plants' ability to withstand the latter (it was recommended that growers use fungicide to fully protect the plant) so he kept breeding. In January of this year, Maureen's Mignon was unveiled to the public.

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In addition to writing books and breeding tomatoes, Gallogly has mentored countless plant pathologists getting their start in Morgantown. Doddling, who has helped Gallogly with cultivating diseases (to test for resistance in plants) and crossbreeding, "because my hands were smaller and smaller than his," says the scientist "is never in a hurry. He has always had time to talk to me and teach me."

WVU graduate student Inly Hernández, who's been working with Gallogly on breeding new tomatoes, agrees, saying: "He's very supportive all the time. It has been very inspiring to work with him. Sometimes you feel tired, you know, and then you arrive in the greenhouse and there's a ninety-year-old man hard at work."

Plans for the future

Just a few miles down the road from the WVU Organic Research Farm, at the Sunshine Nursing Home, Gallogly rests in a bright, airy common space, next to a table crowded with magazines and colored pencils. Above the south of his gray hair, a stuffed TV broadcaster a clarion call show.

Doddling and Doddle have changed out of their muddy boots and arrived for a visit.

"Your tomatoes are in, buddy?" says Doddle, proudly holding up a photo on his cellphone.

Gallogly's pale eyes respond with a smile. He asks Doddling if the team will be sure to hold back as much seed as possible for West Virginia.

Still, Gallogly, who likes his tomatoes sliced fresh with a pinch of salt, is hoping he'll be the one descending tomatoes later this summer, carving them out of the fruit with his trusty long-bladed knife.

"I'm hoping when I'm well enough, I can walk those rows and make some selections," he says. "I've got an impression in my mind of what a good tomato should look like and taste like."

When asked to describe that impression, Gallogly doesn't hesitate.

"A tomato," he says.

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