



## Heirloom Vegetables

**Heirloom vegetables make a great crop for small farmers. If you want a taste of history, learn about seeds of old, where to get them and how to save them.**

By Margaret A. Haapoja

Maybe it was her father's "Rattlesnake" pole beans that convinced Arlene Coco to serve heirloom vegetables in her Duluth, Minn., catering business, Coco's to Geaux. "My father used to send me the beans every year to plant in my garden," Coco says. "He preferred them over 'Blue Runners' or 'Kentucky Wonders' because the 8-foot vines yielded lots of beans. The stunning, mottled green and purple beans lose their purple streaks and turn green when cooked. They have long pods, and the shelled beans are great in stews and soups. Although my dad is gone now, the 'Rattlesnake' beans are still a ritual in our family."

### Books

100 Heirloom Tomatoes for the American Garden; Carolyn J. Male, Workman Publishing Company, 1999.

Heirloom Vegetable Gardening; William Woys Weaver, Henry Holt & Company, 1997.

Melons for the Passionate Grower; Amy Goldman, Artisan, 2002.

The Compleat Squash; Amy Goldman, Workman Publishing Company, 2004.

The Great Garlic Book; Chester Aaron, Ten Speed Press, 1997.

Heirloom Vegetables; Sue Stickland, Simon & Schuster, 1998.

The Heirloom Gardener; Carolyn Jabs, Random House, 1984.

Seed to Seed (Second Edition); Suzanne Ashworth and Kent Whealy, Seed Savers Exchange, 2002. Coco isn't the only one enchanted by heirlooms, which many define as varieties passed down from generation to generation. Inspired by nostalgia and fear of the loss of genetic diversity, today's gardeners are seeking these time-honored seeds in record numbers. According to the National Gardening Bureau, heirlooms are cultivated plant varieties that have been grown for at least 50 years. Rob Johnston, owner of Johnny's Selected Seeds in Winslow, Maine, lists 84 heirloom vegetables in his 2006 seed catalog. He regards heirlooms as keepsakes. Explaining that an heirloom is a variety that owes its existence to the seed saving of amateur gardeners, Johnston says, "Something like 'Blue Hubbard' squash isn't really an heirloom because it has always remained commercial. An heirloom is something you can't buy any more; you have to maintain it through your own efforts."

Johnston's personal favorite is the "Garden of Eden" pole bean, of which its seeds came from a family in New Jersey who received a handful in the 1950s from a neighbor who brought them from Spain or Portugal. "It has a wonderful taste," says Johnston. "I like beans cooked in all different kinds of ways and you can even let these beans get real big in the pods. When you boil them it's like having shell beans and green beans in the same dish."

### Grown by Dedicated Gardeners

According to Kent Whealy, founder of Seed Savers Exchange, the country's largest preserver of heirloom seeds, 90 percent of the seeds available in 1900 no longer exist today. Whealy says that several forces threaten this irreplaceable genetic diversity, including takeovers and consolidations within the mail-order garden seed industry, the profit-motivated hybrid bias of most seed companies, and plant breeding for mechanical harvest and cross-country shipping. Whealy and his organization are doing their best to save these old varieties with a membership of 7,000 people and a collection of 25,000 vegetable varieties at their Decorah, Iowa, Heritage Farm. "Gardeners should be extremely pleased to learn that 2,657 unique, new varieties have been introduced within the past six years," says Whealy.

Heirlooms are always open-pollinated. That means, unlike hybrids, they will duplicate the parent plants in the next generation. "Typically heirlooms are of species that are easy to save seeds for," says Johnston, "which is why they tended



to be maintained. And the seeds maintain viability for a long time.” He encourages beginners to save seeds of tomatoes and beans, two of the easiest to save.

#### Heirloom Seed Sources

Seed Savers Exchange  
(563) 382-5990

Founded in 1975, this granddaddy of heirloom suppliers lists 675 varieties in the catalog and maintains 25,000 vegetable varieties as well as facilitating a seed exchange for members who grow heirlooms.

Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds  
(417) 924-8917

Started seven years ago by a 17-year-old, this company lists 1,000 heirloom seeds and publishes The Heirloom Gardener magazine.

Sand Hill Preservation Center  
(563) 246-2299

Lists 1,000 heirloom seeds and rare poultry.

Filaree Farm  
(509) 422-6940

100 strains of garlic from all over the world.

Marianna’s Heirloom Seeds  
(615) 446-9191

Tomato, pepper and Italian heirloom seeds as well as live plants.

Ronnigers Potato Farm  
(877) 204-8704

Small family farm selling heirloom potatoes.

Johnny’s Selected Seeds  
(877) 564-6697

Includes 84 heirloom varieties as well as hybrids.

Seeds of Change  
(888) 762-7333

Offers a variety of open-pollinated, organic heirlooms from around the world.

International Seed Saving Institute  
(208) 788-4363

100 percent organically grown vegetable, flower and herb seeds.

Southern Exposure Seed Exchange  
(540) 894-9480

Emphasizes heirlooms for the Mid-Atlantic region.

Vermont Bean Seed Company  
(800) 349-1070

Specializes in beans, but carries other vegetables and flowers.

Redwood City Seed Company  
(650) 325-7333

Heirlooms, hot peppers and herbs.

Native Seeds/SEARCH  
(866) 622-5561

A nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing plants used by Native Americans of the Southwest.



Heirloom squash, corn and melons.

Harvest Moon Farms & Seed Company  
(505) 398-6111

Provides culinary specialty, certified organic, gourmet and heirloom seed varieties. Princeton, Mass., gardener Kevin Fielding began growing heirloom tomatoes after he met garden photographer David Cavagnaro on the Internet. For many years, Cavagnaro worked at Seed Savers Exchange. He still grows 200 varieties of heirloom tomatoes as well as other old varieties in his own gardens. He taught city-bred Fielding how to start his own seedlings and save the seeds. The experience was a life-changing one for Fielding, who began to reach for his roots by growing "Mr. Charlie," a red, heavily-ribbed, fluted tomato, and "Chinese" cucumber, a long, curly variety with wonderful flavor.

The intriguing names of many heirlooms are enough to hook most gardeners. "Drunken Woman Fringe-headed" lettuce, "Radiator Charlie's Mortgage Lifter" tomato, "Bull's Blood" beets and "Cherokee Trail of Tears" beans conjure up interesting images with their colorful descriptions. Having grown 15,000 heirlooms over the years, Cavagnaro points to the advantage of finding locally adapted varieties. Among his favorites are "Tommy Toe," a 1-inch cherry tomato that has repeatedly won taste tests; "Moon and Stars" watermelon with its irregular yellow spots; colorful, striped Italian eggplant "Listada di Gandia"; "FeherOzon," a pointed, fleshy, pimento-type pepper from Hungary; and "North Georgia Candy" squash, a smaller, extremely sweet banana type.

Garlic guru Joel Girardin of Cannon Falls, Minn., has been growing heirlooms ever since he perused a Seed Savers Exchange catalog 10 years ago. "When I got their fall catalog listing all the seeds and the people that had them, I just sat down and was totally dumbfounded," he says. Now he and a friend grow 150 varieties of garlic, 200 heirloom tomatoes, 20 different melons, 20 squash and several other vegetable varieties in their one-acre garden. Girardin sells some of the produce at a local farmer's market and he's noticed the public is becoming more educated about heirlooms. "When I first started doing this, I would take the different tomato varieties and cut them up so people could see what they look like inside," he says.

"Now customers have favorites and they're asking for 'Cherokee Purple' or 'Brandywine' by name. Letting people taste them makes a big difference so they can see how sweet they are, how much better they are."

Girardin's favorite heirlooms include "Matt's Wild Cherry," a small tomato that doesn't crack very easily; "French Fingerling" and "Viking Purple" potatoes; "Golden Delicious" squash; "Frog Leg" shallots; and "Georgian Crystal" garlic.

#### Favored for Fine Cuisine

Like many epicures, Jeff Miller, Executive Chef at Papoose Creek Lodge, an eco-tourism resort in Montana that prides itself on sustainability and fine cuisine, enjoys using heirlooms in his menu. Miller orders most of the produce served at the lodge from Gallatin Valley Botanicals near Bozeman, Mont. "Heirloom varieties offer much greater character in flavor, texture, color and shape," he says. "I'm not a nutritionist, but I would put a pretty penny down that they are also more nourishing per pound than what we now call conventional produce."

Among Miller's favorite heirlooms are "Delicata" winter squash; "Dragon Langerie" bean; "Red Russian" kale; "Rosa Bianca" eggplant; and "Chioggia" beets. "'Green Zebra' tomatoes give nice acidity to a dish and can compliment a pairing with other tomatoes that offer more meat and sweetness such as 'Cherokee Purple' and 'Brandywine,'" Miller says. "At their best, these ingredients can elevate the presentation and flavor profile of a dish. An heirloom four-tomato gazpacho can't be touched by any hothouse tomato."

#### To Save Tomato Seeds

1. Squeeze out the jelly-like substance containing the seeds from the cavity of the ripest tomatoes from the best plants. Add ¼ cup water, put in a dish and cover loosely.
2. Ferment for three to four days in a warm place, stirring once a day.
3. Pour off liquefied pulp and floating seeds, retaining the seeds that have sunk to the bottom.
4. Place these seeds in a dish and dry for three to seven days.
5. Label and store in tightly sealed, glass container in a cool place. Heat and moisture are the worst enemies of stored



seeds.

For a complete seed-saving guide that describes specific techniques for saving the seeds of 160 different vegetables, purchase *Seed to Seed*, Second edition, by Suzanne Ashworth. This book can be ordered from Seed Savers Exchange, Decorah, IA. Kirk Bratrud, chef at the Boathouse Restaurant in Superior, Wisc., grew up in a gardening family; he remembers his grandfather keeping a unique strain of pole beans. Although the short growing season in his area limits their availability, Bratrud incorporates heirloom tomatoes into his menus during the summer months. "You tend to have a greater variety of size, shape, color and texture of the flesh for specific uses," he notes. "What is wonderful is that you can have a bright-green tomato that's fully ripe, or a black one or a light-colored one, and tomatoes which are very large or quite small." Bratrud says people growing heirloom tomatoes are very careful about when they pick them so they are usually absolutely, perfectly ripe. He prepares a tureen that encases various tomatoes in a celery root wrapper with layers of eggplant or carrot puree cemented together with aspic. One of his favorite tomatoes is the "Zebra Stripe," which is bright-green with purple ribbing.

"It's absolutely gorgeous and provides wonderful contrast when you cut it and place it in combination with other colored tomatoes," he says.

Owner and chef, Sean Lewis, recently opened Nokomis Restaurant on the North Shore of Lake Superior near Two Harbors, Minn. He has organic produce, including heirloom varieties, shipped in via Fed-Ex from Ohio. Among his favorites are "Green Sausage" and "Siberian Pink" tomatoes; "Pink Wink" potatoes; "Candy Stripe" beets; and "Tongue of Fire" beans.

#### Coveted by Co-operatives

Barth Anderson is director of research and development for Wedge Co-op, the largest consumer-owned, single-site grocery cooperative in the country, located in Minneapolis, Minn. Wedge sells \$25 million worth of produce a year and Anderson says heirloom tomatoes are a high point in their produce year. "When they start coming in August and September, our customers really look forward to them," he says. "They're the Cadillac that we carry. Heirloom tomatoes are more like a peach or a nectarine. They're really dense, very flavor-saturated and those tomatoes definitely have a following—a very strong fan base."

The demand for heirloom tomatoes increases every year at Wedge Co-op, and the co-operative deals with a series of growers that coordinate their planting, growing and harvesting times to guarantee a steady supply. "We would extend our growers even further south if we could find more growers," says Anderson. When the last local tomato comes in, Anderson switches to California organic tomatoes. "But people love the local Minnesota product," he says, "and they can tell the difference if a tomato hasn't sat in a cooler overnight. Coolers sap flavor and anyone in a produce department knows that. The straighter the line between the shopper and the farmer, the better, and I think heirlooms play right into that."

#### Growing Tips from Organic Farmers

Rhys Williams supplies Anderson with nine varieties of heirloom tomatoes from Featherstone Farm, an organic vegetable farm he runs with partner Jack Hedin. He agrees that shipping tomatoes takes a lot of the life and taste out of them.

"Striped German" and "Cherokee Purple" are Featherstone's most popular tomatoes, and their heirloom tomato season generally lasts 10 to 11 weeks. The farm has 75 acres under production, and they sell to grocery stores, restaurants, farmers markets and wholesale markets in Chicago and the Twin Cities.

Arlene Coco's Sesame  
Rattlesnake Pole Beans

#### Ingredients:

1 pound "Rattlesnake" pole beans (flat Italian beans are a good substitute), cleaned and trimmed

1 tsp. kosher salt

1 Tbsp. toasted sesame oil

1 Tbsp. toasted sesame seeds



Preparation: Heat 2 quarts of water in a large pot, bring to boil. Drop beans into water and simmer for 5 to 10 minutes depending on preference of doneness.

Drain beans and plunge into a bowl filled with ice water to stop cooking process.

Sprinkle with salt, sesame oil and seeds, tossing to coat beans evenly.

Serve cold or at room temperature. Williams says heirlooms have been good for the farm, but they are not easy to grow. "Disease is the biggest problem we have," he says. "They're very susceptible to blight, and if you're organic, you've got to be on top of it. Applying copper is basically the only thing you can do and you have to be vigilant about applying it when moisture is present. Also, you have to make sure you stake the plants and anchor them well because some of the varieties, like 'Striped German,' get quite large." Williams grows heirloom tomatoes on black plastic with drip irrigation. He spaces them some distance apart in the row and plants them on a windy ridge for good air penetration.

Once the tomatoes are harvested, they still require extra attention. "They're very thin-skinned," Williams says, "so every step of the way from picking to packing to shipping has to be done with care. A lot of hybrid tomatoes are bred to ship with thick skin, so they can take a lot more abuse. Also, heirlooms don't keep, so you must pick them and use them quickly."

Sandi Weller grows heirlooms in her Tamarack, Minn., garden and sells them at a local farmer's market. Preserving biodiversity and history is important to her. As a cook, the different sizes, shapes, colors and flavors of the old varieties of tomatoes, potatoes, squash, beans, corn, greens and melons appeal to her. Since she began selling her heirlooms at the farmer's market, most customers' reactions have been positive. "Most of them embrace the concept of preserving old varieties for future generations," she says, "and more and more people are looking to the smaller, local grower. They are seeing the health benefits of buying high-quality, flavorful, nutritious food instead of the rather tasteless, plastic produce found in the grocery store."

Weller agrees that heirlooms can be more difficult to grow, that they are more fragile and that their yields are sometimes lower. To counter their tendency toward disease, she mixes varieties and rotates crops, believing that this makes it harder for pests to find what they are looking for and disease is not spread as rapidly.

Weller's favorite heirlooms include "Hutterite Soup," a white bean that cooks into a creamy, hearty soup; "Goldmarie Vining," a flat, yellow bean that stays tender and flavorful even when eight to nine inches long; "Carouby de Maussane," a very prolific French snow pea with 4- to 5-inch pods; "Cocozelle," a summer squash that stays firm when cooked and has a subtle, nutty flavor; "Lakota," an orange and green winter squash with sweet, deep orange flesh; and "Black Plum," a rare tomato that makes a mahogany-colored sauce.

Cavagnaro believes there is ample opportunity for market gardeners to grow heirlooms. "Farmer's markets' and CSAs [Community Supported Agriculture farms where members purchase shares each year] now specialize in many of these older, more flavorful and interesting varieties," he says. "People love something new and are understandably both tired and suspicious of commercial agriculture products." Amateur gardeners are increasingly intrigued by heirlooms and by the opportunity these time-tested varieties offer to connect them with the past. "When you grow things from seed," says Kevin Fielding of his heirloom vegetables, "you really appreciate the whole process. You have a feeling of participating in something that is so basic, yet spiritual."

Margaret A. Haapoja is a Minnesota Master Gardener and a freelance writer who grows heirlooms like "Bohunk" in her garden.

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