

PRESERVING THE PAST

Seed varieties from Sow True Seed of Asheville, North Carolina; the company estimates 93 percent of U.S. seed varieties have been lost over the past century.

THE SOIL IS WARMING. The days are longer. And turnstiles of brightly colored seed packets are prominently displayed in every hardware store, supermarket and gardening center.

Spinning through the stacks can be dizzying. Conventional or organic? Heirloom or hybrid? Mixes or single seeds or full sun or container-friendly?

Does it even matter? It does.

The seeds you choose set the stage for everything that follows, say gardening experts. In fact, selecting seeds is the step that a grower has the most control over in the entire life of a garden.

“When you start directly from seed you can choose what varieties you want to grow,” says Ira Wallace, an educator with and longtime member of Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, a central Virginia-based-seed supply cooperative. “You’re not dependent on what big box nurseries have on their shelves, which may or may not do so well in your garden.”

There are upsides to each choice. Conventional seeds are cheaper, easier to find and likely more familiar. Hybrid varieties might combine characteristics that make your plants more prolific or better able to tolerate heat or drought. Seed mixes (such as a variety of salad greens) hedge your bets; if one green doesn’t grow well, perhaps another will.

TREASURING HEIRLOOMS

Then, there are heirlooms. These days the term is most closely connected to tomatoes, but an heirloom variety can be a bean, a squash, okra or melon. Technically, an heirloom is any variety that is old and open-pollinated, meaning a grower can harvest and replant seeds, and the subsequent generations of the plant will stay true to its parents.

But to many, heirlooms have a mystique that stretches far beyond an ability to save seeds. Planting an heirloom is akin to recreating life from hundreds of years ago. Southern Exposure Seed Exchange sells a lima bean variety that was a favorite of Thomas Jefferson’s. Standout Virginia chef Travis Milton cooks with a corn variety — Cherokee White Eagle — that Native Americans took with them on the Trail of



Taste Of The Past

Planting heirloom varieties cultivates history, diversity and flavor in your garden *Story by* CHRISTINA NIFONG

Tears.

“It’s a lot like you would think of heirloom antiques,” says Kathleen Reed, a Roanoke-based agent for the Virginia Cooperative Extension. “Heirlooms are seeds that were passed down through families and have stories and personal histories.”

By some definitions, an heirloom variety must have existed before World War II, as the end of the war was the advent of American industrialization of agriculture and food production. At that time, crops were selected for their abilities to be shipped far distances, to grow in uniform sizes and colors, to be picked early and ripen en route, to flourish with the application of chemical pesticides and herbicides. Hybrid varieties became the norm, thus growers were dependent on seed companies to plant their crops.

In a few generations, an incredible diversity of fruits and vegetables and grains was all but lost. Sow True Seeds estimates 93 percent of U.S. seed varieties have been lost over the past century.

In response, seed banks, seed libraries and seed swaps began to crop up. As did seed companies with a focus on preserving heirloom varieties, educating gardeners on how to save their seeds and testing multiple varieties of a particular plant to provide know-how to growers. Southern Exposure Seed Exchange offered its first seed catalog in 1983. Sow True Seed, a seed company based in Asheville, North Carolina, opened in 2009.

Often, retiring farmers will bring seeds grown on their family farm for generations to the seed companies. “He’ll say something like, ‘My children left home and are not interested in growing things,’ ”



explains Chris Smith, communications and marketing manager for Sow True Seeds. "So, we'll document its history and have it grown out by trusted farmers, and try to get that seed into as many hands as possible to try to give it a future. We get very excited when we come across these seeds."

For gardeners, though, taste is typically the top reason for planting heirlooms.

Many heirlooms were selected for their distinct flavors, so they can be sweeter or earthier or more bitter. They're also often interesting colors, sizes and textures. Think: Cherokee Purple tomato, Aunt Ruby's German Green tomato, Candy Roaster Melon squash, White Icicle radish.

More varieties offer more opportunities for growers, as well. You can plant one kind of bean, for example, meant to perform best in the finicky and sometimes cold temperatures of early spring, a type that loves summer's heat and long light

Out & About

Heritage Festival at Monticello

To dig deeper into heirlooms, visit the Heritage Harvest Festival at Monticello in Albemarle County on Sept. 21-22. In its 13th year, the festival is sponsored in part by the Southern Exposure Seed Exchange and brings together gardening educators, celebrated chefs and well-known food writers and speakers. Tickets are available at heritageharvestfestival.com.

and yet another that thrives in the warm, shortening days of fall.

"We're not used to that distinction in modern times," Wallace says.

Each plant offers a particular taste, but also a better chance at success in the

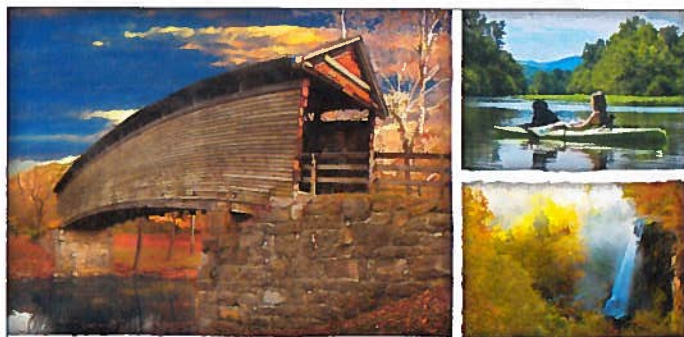
garden.

"Hybrids are selected for wide adaptability where heirlooms were selected more for local use," explains Wallace. "If you select a variety that does well in your micro climate, you can have really good results."

Reed warns, though, that heirloom plants may not be as productive as more conventional varieties. They may also be less resistant to today's pests or unusual weather patterns as more recently developed hybrids. Her advice: Plant some heirlooms for flavor and fun, but plant some tried and true varieties, as well.

Sow True Seed's Smith agrees. "The longer you're gardening, the more you kind of focus on the varieties you know and love. But most people will keep a space open for experimenting. They look forward to finding something new or exciting.

"Heirlooms are a chance to rediscover an old variety." ★



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