



Garden Variety

If you love heirloom tomatoes or unusual veggies, you may have this farm to thank

It started with a classified ad in 1975. Diane Ott Whealy and her then-husband, Kent, put an ad in Mother Earth News in hopes of connecting with people who wanted to preserve and trade heirloom seeds. A handful of people said, "Yes, I love growing my granny's seeds." Forty years later, Seed Savers Exchange boasts 13,000 members and a collection of more than 20,000 varieties of heirloom plants, which they keep at their farm in Decorah, Iowa (above). Diane tells us why saving seeds is crucial.

What inspired you to start Seed Savers Exchange?

When my grandfather passed away in 1974, Kent and I realized that if he hadn't given us his morning glory seeds, those flowers could've disappeared from our culture. We wondered how often there are seeds with nobody to pass them along to. At the same time, the gardening industry was changing with the commercial introduction of hybrid seeds, which are crossbred for desired traits but need to be repurchased every year. Hybrid seeds became popular with gardeners, and eventually many seed companies dropped the nonhybrid seeds.

Why is it important to save seeds?

Think of the precarious situation we'd be in if our food came from a

single source! There are thousands of plant varieties, but most of the food at the grocery store comes from just a few. A few years ago we had a drought in Iowa, and since almost all the corn grown here is the same variety, it was all affected by the drought. But on our farm we have diverse varieties, and some handle drought better than others. Our corn wasn't affected as much. There's no way to know what plant

material we're going to need to face all the challenges that are part of agricultural life. We want to make sure that we have all the genetic pieces to maintain diversity.

When you look back over 40 years, what makes you most proud?

Over the years, thousands of people have joined our cause and we've saved 20,000 seed varieties. Every seed has a story, a personality. The 'German Pink' tomato is wonderful for canning, which I learned because my grandma always used it for canning. You can see a culture, how it was used, who was eating it—it leads to a history lesson about where our food comes from.

—Debbie Koenig



Check Out Some Seeds

Next time you check out a new book from the library, pick up some heirloom seeds too. More than 300 libraries and community centers across the country now offer "seed libraries" where you can get a selection of seeds early in the growing season, then clean and dry seeds from your harvest and return them for someone else to sow. To find one near you, visit seedlibraries.weebly.com



Heirlooms to Try This Season

Whether you plan to sow seeds yourself (check out seedsavers.org) or shop the harvest at the farmers' market, these three heirloom vegetables are worth seeking out

'Lolla Rossa' lettuce:

Pale green at the center with glorious, garnet-colored frilled edges, this mild-flavored, tender-crisp lettuce lends a touch of elegance to a simple tossed salad.

'Cherry Roma' tomatoes:

They may look like miniature plum tomatoes, but these beauties pack a spicy-sweet punch.

'Amish' snap peas:

Delicate and crisp, with a sweet, full flavor. According to Seed Savers Exchange, this snap pea was grown by the Amish long before the more commonly found varieties.

