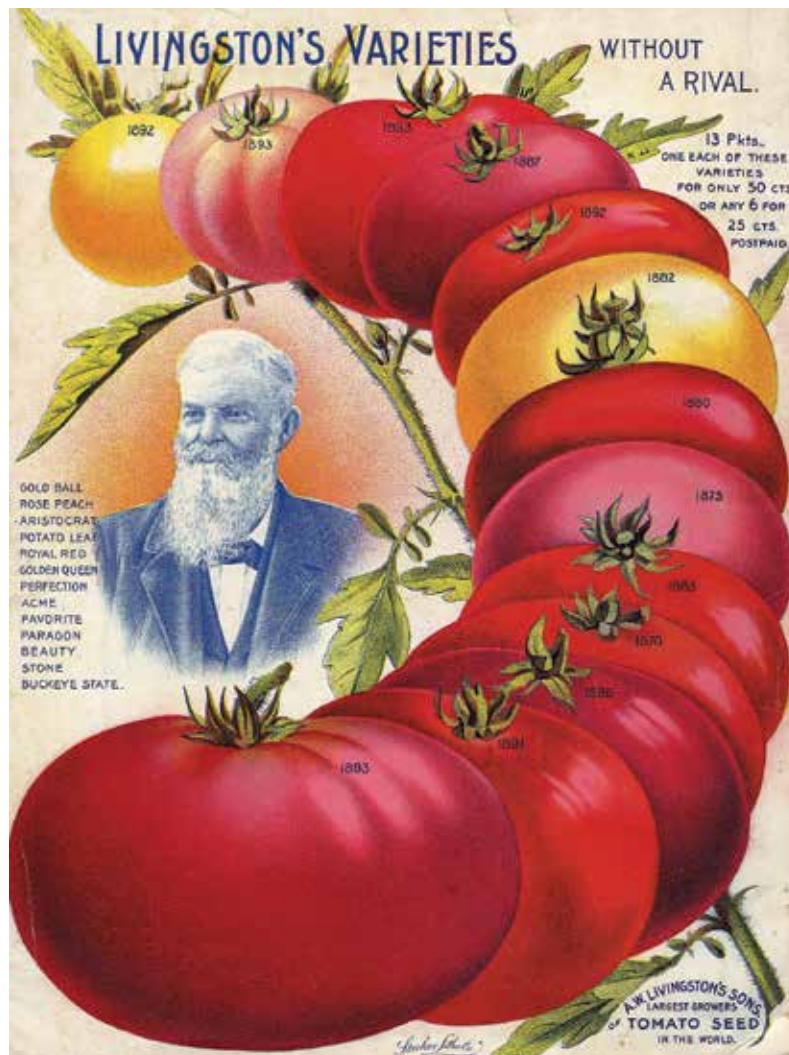


EDIBLE GARDENING

Heirloom Vegetables

What Are They and Why Are They Important?

by Ira Wallace



Many old varieties found in vintage seed catalogs are still available today thanks to gardeners who have passed them down through the generations.

Heirloom vegetables have been capturing the attention of chefs and discerning gardeners in recent years. These are old varieties that are open-pollinated and have been maintained by families or in communities for at least a few generations. What is considered “old” is debated. Many modern garden authorities consider 50 years a minimum; others say before the Second World War and the widespread acceptance of hybrid varieties. “Open pollinated” means the variety is not a hybrid and reproduces true to type from its own seed. Exceptions to this are heirloom strains of garlic, rhubarb, and asparagus, which are usually vegetatively propagated.

TRACING HISTORY

Heirloom vegetables almost always have intriguing backstories. Sometimes a variety may have a clear history and date of introduction. For example, the Ideal Market pole bean was first sold in 1914 as the Black Creaseback bean, in Mobile, Alabama, by Van Antwerp’s Seed Store. In 1924, it was re-introduced in New Orleans as Reuter’s Ideal Market by Reuter Seed Company. It is still available today from heirloom seed sources.

The stories of some heirlooms can be found in archeological records. For example, “cut short” type beans have been found in a 1,400-year-old Native American site in Jessamine County, Kentucky. These days, most varieties of cut short beans—so named because the beans are tightly packed in short pods—are maintained by being passed down through generations of families. Many of the cut short beans in the Appalachian region have origins dating to the 1700s, when a Cherokee bride supposedly brought the bean to her marriage with a Scottish immigrant husband.

Other heirloom vegetables were brought to this country and maintained by religious or ethnic groups like the Amish and the Italians. There are also many heirlooms with ties to the African American experience. The Heirloom Collard Project was created to encourage African American gardeners to celebrate this heritage and take their place in today's seed-saving community.

The seeds of William Alexander Heading collards, one of the project's first releases, came from 79-year-old Black farmer William Alexander of Columbia, North Carolina, who got the seeds from his father. This rich, mustardy-tasting variety has a touch of sweetness and highlights the fact that collards are the only *Brassica oleracea* developed in the Southeast, largely by enslaved Africans before emancipation.

Another Southern favorite, Sea Island Red Pea, remains a symbol of continued resistance by Africans who escaped slavery. This small red field pea (southern pea or black-eyed pea) from Africa is grown on the South Carolina sea islands. After emancipation, these peas became a staple of the Gullah Geechee kitchen, often served with Carolina gold rice or in Low Country Hoppin' John (a traditional southern dish enjoyed on New Year's Day).

WHY GROW HEIRLOOMS?

Heirlooms offer gardeners a wider selection of plants than can be found at most large retail stores. Instead of choosing from a handful of the same varieties every year, you can explore hundreds of options.

Some heirlooms have been selected over generations for how wonderful they taste—often improving flavor—instead of for how they all ripen at the same moment or how well they can ship. There's a reason that folks talk about the old-timey tomato varieties such as 'Cherokee Purple' and 'Mortgage Lifter'.

Generational seed saving leads to local adaptability. By natural selection, saved seeds from heirlooms and other open-pollinated varieties in a region



Top to bottom: Cut short beans, William Alexander Heading collards, 'Cherokee Purple' tomatoes.

will, over time, become better suited to the area. For example, Heirloom Collard Project growers noticed a big difference in frost damage when they grew a number of collard varieties side by side. They were then able to collect seeds for future use from the especially cold-

tolerant plants. These landrace seeds can increase resilience to climatic and other ecosystem changes very quickly.

Open pollinated, heirlooms help preserve genetic diversity. Climate change and agricultural industrialization are forces that can negatively impact genetic diversity. Actively working to protect the resilience offered by keeping as wide a genetic base of food plants as possible will help crops adapt as needed. In the 1970s, thousands of acres of Midwestern corn were lost because of its susceptibility to a particularly devastating disease. Consolidation in the seed industry has led to a drastic reduction in the varieties of vegetable seeds available. When farmers and gardeners grow heirloom and other open-pollinated crops—and especially when they save those seeds—they fight back against this trend and help make sure more wonderfully diverse vegetables are available for us now and for future generations. ■

Ira Wallace is a worker/grower at the cooperative Southern Exposure Seed Exchange in Mineral, Virginia.

Resource

Heirloom Collard Project,
heirloomcollards.org.

Sources

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