

Seeds of doubt: America's love affair with heirloom fruits and veggies

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Kathy McFarland, a retired English teacher, arrived at [Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds](#) 12 years ago. In her time with the company, she has witnessed incredible growth at their headquarters in Mansfield, Mo. — the “middle of nowhere,” McFarland called it, albeit famously the place where [Laura Ingalls Wilder](#) wrote the “Little House” books.

When McFarland first started, all orders were filled by hand. The company now relies on two Stamprite seed-packing machines that can process up to 40,000 packs a day for customers in 50 states and 70 countries. The middle of nowhere, Missouri — now increasingly connected to the rest of the world via a thriving mail-order business built on antique seeds.

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In 2019, Baker Creek sold 8 million seed packs — a vast supply grown in the United States, Asia, Europe, and South America.

“Our seeds truly are grown globally,” McFarland, who oversees media and public relations for the seed purveyor, said in an e-mail.

The sharp uptick in sales at Baker Creek — the company bills itself as “America’s top source for pure heirloom seeds” — mirrors a shift in the seed industry and in wider food culture. In just a few decades, heirlooms have grown from a fringe movement to a thriving international business.

In 1994, the National Gardening Association estimated that heirlooms accounted for 2 percent of the US seed market, according to a New York Times article published that year. The association does not currently track heirloom use in its garden surveys, so executive director [Dave Whiting](#) could speak only anecdotally about the trend.

“I’ve been in the industry for about 20 years, and I’ve certainly seen a huge increase, especially in the last ten years,” he said.

Diane Ott Whealy, who cofounded the [Seed Savers Exchange](#) (SSE) with her late husband, Kent, in 1975, was an early heirloom proponent. She remembered how shocking the unusual, colorful, old-variety tomatoes in their Decorah, Iowa, garden once were.

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“People were just gobsmacked,” she recalled. “Now it’s like ... everybody has seen a purple tomato.”

Today, heirloom produce routinely appears on restaurant menus, and industry insiders see it as a fundamental shift in diners’ values.

“This is a definitely a long-term trend. It is not a fad,” said Hudson Riehle, senior vice president of research and knowledge at the National Restaurant Association. “You can go down virtually any menu item and ... there are suppliers that are focusing on ... the resurrection of different flavors and tastes that were quite common for previous generations.”

Yet Whealy finds that some restaurateurs have no idea what they’re peddling.

How well do any of us know the heirlooms on our plates or in our gardens?

There is no such thing, for example, as a prototypical heirloom tomato. Instead, there are hundreds and hundreds of varieties – from the Tiffen Mennonite to the Mikado to the German Pink that Whealy’s grandmother used to slice, sprinkle with sugar, and serve forth.

“[Every heirloom] has a story,” Whealy said. “It isn’t just a descriptor.”

Culturally, the movement has triumphed. Heirloom produce, ancient grains, and heritage meats are now the heroes of the stories we tell about good food. Our hunger for the old ways is evident, too, in popular pre-industrial diets and other backward-looking food fads, like paleo. Let no food touch my lips that wasn’t eaten by great-granddaddy, or papa caveman.

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Modern gardeners and diners alike cherish old cultivars of produce: homegrown — so the tale goes — and handed down from one steward to the next. We’ve been led to believe that heirlooms are the last bastions of true flavor in an industrialized food and farm system.

Such arguments, often quite beautiful, are hard to resist. Heirlooms imply a personal connection to one of life’s most basic and beautiful beginnings, for they are seductive seeds. Seeds with stories.

For a lucky few, heirlooms are indeed many of these things.

Whealy lovingly remembers the tiny black morning glory seeds she received from her grandfather, whose immigrant parents had brought with them to Iowa from Bavaria.

“I just felt so connected to family and to people I never really thought about,” she recalled. “Here I have a living connection to my ancestors. It was quite a revelation.”

But as heirlooms have grown in popularity, many of the networks that link us to these seeds have become increasingly tangled. More problematic, in an era of changing climate, the cult of the old may have real-time repercussions on the future of our food.

Who are you calling heirloom?

In 1975 — which isn’t that long ago, in human or in plant time — it seemed no one had heard of an heirloom vegetable, fruit, or grain.

“We thought we were the only crazy ones,” recalled Diane Ott Whealy.

At the time, SSE, a handful of other private organizations, and US Department of Agriculture seed banks were waging a war against time itself. With the industrialization of agriculture and the consolidation of seed companies, the once great diversity of the American seed supply dropped. Many old varieties were lost forever.

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“Heirloom” became a watchword for the nascent movement to save our agricultural heritage.

But in some botanizing circles, the use of the term dates at least to the 1930s. Garden writers of that era occasionally celebrated “heirloom plants” — a rose, a tea olive, an orchid — that could transport growers back to the idealized, idyllic garden of youth.

In the 1940s, two state horticulturalists further refined the concept — with “heirloom beans.”

Making frequent appearances in local media and at garden clubs, J.R. Hepler of the New Hampshire Extension Service and Richard Hopp of the Vermont Experiment Station sought to collect “beans which have been passed from father to son, generation after generation (The Burlington Free Press, October 1948).” “Beans that have been grown in one family for 50 or 75 years, or even longer” (Kenosha News, January 1948). “Beans without real names ... [that] you can’t buy ... in the market” (The Berkshire Eagle, May 1948).

Definitions of what constitutes an “heirloom” now vary from company to company, although most are linked to the romantic ideal popularized by the bean boys: Heirloom seeds are passed down, generation to generation.

Some seed purveyors or seed banks may require a certain time in continuous cultivation to warrant “heirloom” status. For SSE, the minimum is 20 years.

There is no industry — or government — standard.

Stephanie Greene, supervising plant physiologist at the USDA Agricultural Research Service in Fort Collins, Co., said she and her colleagues generally try to avoid the term “because it’s so nebulous. You know, when you say ‘heirloom’ you don’t really know what you’re talking about.”

An heirloom seed is perhaps most easily defined by what it is not — a “modern” hybrid.

Hybrid plants, first developed commercially in the 1920s and omnipresent in the garden trade by the 1950s, yield prolifically. But hybrids aren’t stable genetic lines: should a gardener save a seed, the second generation will not match the first. Unlike hybrids, the seeds of heirlooms and other open-pollinated varieties breed “true” – like mother, like daughter. All open-pollinated plant seeds can be saved; hybrids must be purchased yearly.

For decades, garden writers like me drew hard lines in the soil. We said that in the beginning, there was the heirloom — and we strongly suggested that plant breeders have been debasing the heavenly fruits and vegetables of the Garden of Eden ever since. Through us, the story of seeds became a vast morality play, with its predictable villains (hybrids; scientists) and its honorable heroes (heirlooms; home gardeners).

Heirlooms of the future

“It’s not a good/bad thing. It’s not an evil thing. It’s not a pure/not pure thing,” said Ken Greene, cofounder of the Hudson Valley Seed Company, a New York-based purveyor of heirloom and open-pollinated varieties. “Let’s not put a value judgment on [it].”

All seeds may be sacred, but none are actually *holy*. Many heirloom boosters openly recognize limits. Even Richard Hopp, who had been so excited about his heirloom bean trials back in 1949, was disappointed to notice that some of his antique plants seemed more prone to disease.

The USDA’s Greene (no relation to Ken Greene) explained that “the big thing about these older varieties ... is that they’re generally not as disease resistant and insect resistant — that’s why they’ve been abandoned.”

Grown internationally and on a commercial scale — as heirloom tomatoes increasingly are — an heirloom may therefore require more chemicals than a newer variety. Heirloom does not mean organic. Nor does it mean local. Yield is also a problem.

For affluent American eaters with the luxury of living under the delicious dictatorship of the palate, surely any sacrifice is worth it at the altar of taste. What about that famous heirloom flavor?

"It's a myth," [Stephen Jones](#), a wheat breeder and director of the Bread Lab at Washington State University, wrote by e-mail.

"Just because it's old doesn't mean it's good," he clarified by phone. "In the grains, we have old wheat that tastes good; we have old wheat that tastes horrible. We have new wheats that taste good; we have new wheats that don't taste good."

If it's not a question of good or evil, delicious or disgusting, how should Americans consider the heirloom?

"Look at them as these little jewels," Jones said. "They have value. I love history, too, and the old things. But realize that the people that developed these — and these were developed by people — they would be quite amused if they saw today that that's as good as we can do, or that's as far as we can go. ... 'Heirloom' is a good word, right? You don't wear your heirloom watch every day. ... You cherish it and you kind of go on, too."

The "heirloom" label is so evocative, yet so revealing of a human's — not a plant's — way of being in the world. It undersells the true nature of the seed.

"We're not trying to stop time, or put all these seeds in museums," explained Ken Greene. "Seeds are living beings. They're living organisms. ... We want to be *increasing* diversity. We want to be adapting varieties to different regions. We want to be making sure that they taste great, that they perform well. Whether we're thinking about climate change or flavor-profiles, if we keep everything the same, some heirlooms aren't that great."

Greene is an advocate for "heirlooms of tomorrow" — open-pollinated and regionally adapted to a changing climate. So is Jones, who calls for "modern heirlooms, modern ancients, and modern heritage" developed in a responsible way and released to the people.

Looking back at her place at the start of the heirloom movement, Diane Ott Whealy admitted that "sometimes I don't think [heirlooms] need to be changed, because" — she said with a laugh — "they're kind of perfect. ... [But] we keep them in their true form so that they can be altered to fit a need. We're not purists, you know."

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