

VIEW FROM LUPINE VALLEY

Heirlooms

What is an heirloom?

This question is asked frequently both in workshops and at markets. Many people have a vague idea that heirlooms are good, but not a precise idea of why.

An heirloom is a variety, usually over 100 years old, that has been nurtured, selected, and handed down by virtue of saving seeds from one grower to another for generations. Until the end of the Second World War, when hybrid varieties began to flourish, most plants were of the heirloom variety. Unlike hybrids, which do not produce the same fruit from their seeds but some variation on one of their parents, heirlooms are open-pollinators and always reproduce themselves exactly. Because a grower will select seeds to save from the strongest plants, over time the seeds begin to develop a hardiness to that particular climate and soil.

Heirlooms are beneficial because they preserve history, promote biodiversity, and provide the option to save seeds. Not to mention that they are fun to grow and eat.

I was drawn to heirlooms my second year of gardening when I decided to dabble in seed saving.

A former French major, I am attracted to many heirloom lettuces, and, in an attempt to “keep up my French,” I grow the following: Merveille des Quatre Saisons, Reine des Glaces, and Rouge d'Hiver. If, by chance, you specialized in Italian, Spanish, or Ukranian, varieties can be found in these, and many other, languages.

Other heirlooms dear to my heart include Lemon Cucumber, Haricot Vert, Rattlesnake Snap Bean, Lazy Housewife Bean, Moon and Stars Watermelon, Star of David Okra, Fish Pepper, Cherokee Purple Tomato, and Riesentraube Tomato (German for “little bunch of grapes”).

I buy many of my seeds from Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, Iowa. When the colorful catalog arrives, it brightens the dismal January day. Around Valentine’s Day, I make a big fire in my fireplace and spend a delightful afternoon ordering my favorite seeds.

- Louise Bierig