



Plant a Piece of History

by Stacy Harris

History has given us many gifts, one of which is the continuation of plants using seeds dating back thousands of years. I love just dreaming of the life our ancestors lived and the gardens that they tended and nurtured. My family of nine makes a habit of visiting historic plantations in different states each year. The one commonality is that they all have a garden spot, whether it be a knot garden, square foot garden, or a huge planted garden. I love them all, as I am sure their owners have through the years.

More than the historical romanticism that I love so dearly, heirloom gardening affords very practical benefits. Many of the best-tasting, most prolific, healthy, and health-producing plants are harvested from heirloom seeds. Additionally, family unity and sustainability as well as being part of history, geography, science, and wildlife contribute to an abundance of living and fulfillment that very few activities can match.

Heirloom varieties are usually not as uniform in shape as hybrid plants, but the flavor is exceptional in comparison. We are used to seeing beautiful, perfect-looking specimens in the grocery store, therefore heirloom produce appears to be less attractive, but once you have tasted the captivating heirloom varieties, they become alluringly gorgeous because of what they contribute in flavor, texture, and their extraordinary uniqueness.

Because heirlooms have not been genetically modified, they are able to produce plants that are just as prolific, healthy, disease-resistant, and resilient to weather extremes as they did for our ancestors. Genetically modified plants have genes added or deleted from them, causing alterations in the entire structure of the plant. Genetic engineering is usually done to achieve a trait that is not normally held by an organism. These genetically modified plants bear sterile seeds or seeds that revert only to one of the parent genes, therefore never producing the same plant if producing a plant at all. Heirloom seeds are open-pollinating seeds, which mean that they can reproduce themselves from seeds. Nature created the cycle of plant life whereby a seed falls to the ground and the seed produces another plant in its likeness. Why disturb the perfect means of reproduction given created in nature?

It is truly amazing that by planting heirloom seeds, we are planting a piece of history. Our own native Indians have provided us with the original corn, squash, and potatoes that they survived on. Many seeds traveled over the seas and were brought by European and Asian immigrants. The Europeans brought cabbage, pole beans, and carrots. The Asians brought radishes, lettuces,

and onions. We are tasting the same flavors and textures as did our predecessors. History is being seen right in our flourishing heirloom gardens.

Family stories are connected to many of the heirloom seeds we possess. The seeds, just like the infamous family recipes, get passed down through the generations, along with the stories of our great-great grandmothers and grandfathers who harvested and cooked from these very plants and relied on them for their sustenance. My dad is passing the purple-hull peas that have adorned our table for as long as I remember down to me and my children. I am sure that our ancestors enjoyed family unity as I do with my children in the great outdoors, actually living life while sharing responsibility and passing down life-giving truths by teaching the necessities of life while working alongside of one another. These real activities of life give competence to the next generation and teach responsibility and care for the earth.

Heirloom seeds consistently yield a crop of fruits, vegetables, and herbs with extraordinary flavor, life-giving health, family unity, and life long sustainability. Our ancestors have always relied on their kitchen gardens as a way of life, and we should learn to do the same and pass down our knowledge and passion for generations to come. I look forward to passing down my favorite life-giving heirloom seeds and recipes to my children and children's children as well as to anyone else who will appreciate them.

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Heirloom Gardening Tips

1. Always order seeds from a reputable source such as Rareseeds.com or Southernexposure.com
2. Be sure to get your soil tested in the winter to adjust the pH. Send your soil to your local extension office for results. This tip will save money and headaches.
3. Many seeds need a head start indoors. Try not to be too hasty to plant, because if plants are left indoors too long, they will become weak and lanky. It is best to move them outdoors when the plants produce their second set of leaves.
4. Be careful to acclimate the plants that have been indoors for a few days to a week on a porch or near the house in the shade before planting in the ground. This gives them a chance to get accustomed to the bright sun and temperature.
5. Keep a garden journal or layout of what you are planting and where you are planting so that the subsequent spring you can rotate your crops. This will improve soil structure and decrease the likelihood of pests.
6. When saving seeds, choose your most robust and favorite plants to extract the seeds. Always store seeds in a dry, cool, and dark location. I like to use 4-ounce glass Mason jars and store them in the refrigerator. The seeds should last for years.

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by Stacy Harris

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