

Heirloom Vegetable Varieties

One of the hottest trends in vegetable gardening today is the growing of heirloom varieties. There are many reasons why gardeners are turning to heirloom vegetables. For some, it is a way of connecting with their past. Especially for those of us who have been around a while, there is the familiarity of varieties that our parents grew and that we enjoyed at the dinner table. For others, it is simply a matter of taste. Arguably, heirloom varieties of vegetables have more flavor than their modern counterparts.

From a biological and ecological perspective, perpetuation of heirloom vegetables is critical to the preservation of genetic diversity. In that sense, even the backyard gardener who grows “hand me down” varieties is doing a great service in preserving this invaluable gene pool.

What is an heirloom variety?

The definition of an heirloom vegetable is a matter of debate among amateur gardeners, vegetable farmers, and cultural historians. Most agree that an heirloom variety must predate the era when the first hybrid vegetables developed from inbred lines were introduced. That was in 1951. Some think that heirlooms should include only those varieties that were not developed for the commercial trade. The one thing that all agree on is that an heirloom must be “old”.

Heirloom varieties are also described as being open-pollinated; in other words, the plants come true to form generation after generation. This is in contrast to hybrid varieties in which the offspring typically resemble one of the parent varieties involved in the hybridization process. What it all means for the home gardener is that you can collect and save seed from heirloom varieties, sow them in subsequent seasons, and get plants identical to the parent plant.

There are some exceptions to the open-pollination feature of heirlooms. Members of the squash family, including pumpkins, will readily cross-pollinate, with the result that the offspring in subsequent plantings will be nothing like the parent. So, it is not advisable to save seed from squash and pumpkins that have been grown in the vicinity of one another. The same is true of members of the brassica family, e.g.. broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts.

Also, some heirloom vegetables such as potatoes and garlic are propagated vegetatively and not from seed, so the term open-pollinated is irrelevant.

What are some heirloom vegetable varieties suitable for Massachusetts gardeners?

There are hundreds of heirloom varieties now available. The list below is not at all inclusive and probably does not list many of your favorites, but it is a starting point for anyone wanting to grow some heirloom vegetables. The most popular heirloom vegetable seems to be the tomato. As such, there are many varieties available to home gardeners. Among these are:

- Mortgage Lifter - pink/red beefsteak type
- Red Brandywine - maybe the best tasting of the Brandywine strains
- Brandywine - classic heirloom that some gourmets feel is the best tasting tomato
- German Johnson - deep pink with large yields for an heirloom variety
- Earl of Edgecombe - golden yellow and uniformly shaped (round)
- Black Brandywine - dark purple version of Brandywine

- Black Krim - dark maroon color, very tasty but may give poor yields
- Matt's Wild Cherry - very sweet cherry type tomato
- Amish Paste - red/orange, sausage shaped tomato
- San Marzano - one of the best plum tomatoes, great for drying, roasting, and sauces
- Striped Roman - plum type, red with yellow stripes

Next to tomatoes, beans of various types may be the most popular heirloom. Some choice varieties are:

- Kentucky Wonder - introduced in 1864 and still one of the most popular pole beans
- Scarlet Runner - used by Native Americans, attractive scarlet flowers
- Tendergreen Improved - bush type bean with round, 6-inch long pods
- Duane Baptiste Potato Bean - white bean native to the region grown for drying
- Vermont Cranberry - attractive dry bean great for baking
- Jacob's Cattle - dry bean traditionally used in bean soup

Other heirloom vegetables:

- Beets - Detroit
- Cabbage - Early Jersey Wakefield
- Carrot - Danvers Half Long, Nantes
- Corn - Golden Bantam
- Cucumber - Boston Pickling, Improved Long Green
- Leek - Giant Musselburgh
- Lettuce - Black-Seeded Simpson
- Melons - Hale's Best, Jenny Lind
- Potato - Green Mountain, Irish Cobbler, Cowhorn, Kerr's Pink, Binje
- Pumpkin - Howden
- Radish - French Breakfast
- Winter Squash - Hubbard

Where can one obtain heirloom vegetables?

Heirloom vegetables have become so popular that many seed companies now list varieties in their catalogs. There are also some specialty catalogs for heirlooms. Local garden centers sell both seeds and plants of heirlooms.

Some non-profit sources in Massachusetts specializing in heirlooms are:

Old Sturbridge Village Seed Store, 1 Old Sturbridge Village Rd., Sturbridge, MA 01566
508-347-0270, <http://www.shoposv.org>

Plimoth Plantation, Plimoth Plantation Museum Shops, P.O. Box 1620, Plymouth, MA 02360
800-262-9356 x 8332, <http://www.plimoth.org/>

Seed Savers Exchange has been promoting the preservation and utilization of heirloom varieties for 36 years. 3094 North Winn Road, Decorah, IA 52101
563 382-5990 <http://www.seedsavers.org>

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