

Saving Seeds as a Sacred Service

By Judi Segebarth

William Woys Weaver's book *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening* reads like a love story. And as I read, I held my breath: "*Only six seeds sprang to life after nearly a month of fretful waiting. . . . the pepper came that close to extinction.*"

Sigh.

That pepper in question wasn't just any old pepper. It came from seeds Weaver found in the bottom of his grandmother's freezer.

- Pepper seeds that had been lovingly stored in baby food jars by his grandfather many years before.
- Pepper seeds with a history.
- Pepper seeds with a purpose.

I had travelled to Devon, not far outside of Philadelphia, to see Weaver and his gardens. There I was introduced to a type of garden I had never before met. True, Weaver had borders, herbs, and tender hot house beauties, but, as he pointed to the dark green fenced-in plot of raised beds he explained, "This is a seed garden." In this relatively small area, he has grown more than 2,000 varieties of open-pollinated (not hybridized) vegetables.

Not all at the same time, of course, for one need not save seeds every year. Seeds are never all planted in any given year, thus hedging and protecting against disasters of crop failures. Here at his historical "Roughwood" he grows, weeds, harvests, catalogs, ferments and, most important, protects a crucial gene pool of heirloom plants that star in his book, ". . . a family album of what America has eaten."

Heirloom Vegetable Gardening is a book that needed to be written. It filled an empty horticultural space by cataloging vegetable varieties that had never been described.

It now sits next to **Seed to Seed** by Suzanne Ashworth, the best book on seed saving I know of. These two volumes are a good start for anyone interested in becoming involved in the fascinating art of protecting our vitally important past of repasts.

That past is rapidly disappearing, along with the small family farm.

Organic growers have long saved their favorite seeds of herbs, flowers and food crops. Plant that have acclimated to individual micro-climates and soil types seem to have the added benefit of their own truly "homegrown" resistances to disease and climactic stresses.

Far removed from big ag business and that search for the super vegetable, the Seed Savers Exchange (SSE) in Decorah, Iowa, protects thousands of heirlooms. It is the most

well-known of seed savers, cataloging thousands of nonhybrid garden seeds and acting as a clearing house for its members who save, trade and promote these important packages of life.

Plant researcher Marc Rogers put saving seeds in another perspective when he said, "*Any small measure of self-reliance we can recapture in our overly dependent society is cause for satisfaction.*"

More like cause for celebration if you ask me.

As for myself, I save seeds from my open-pollinated tomatoes. Brandywine is my favorite. Striped German is a beautiful marbled yellow and orange large-fruited oldie. Goldie is great, and you guessed it, gold.

On that note, I'll leave you with a thought from Mr. Weaver: "*The hoe is merely a tool of the kitchen.*"

So happy heirloom gardening. Which leads to happy eating.

Saving Tomato Seeds

Here's how to harbor an heirloom of horticultural history and keep the vegetable world healthy:

1. Pick and wash your best ripe nonhybrid tomato. (If you bought tomato plants at a garden center or department store, it's likely they are hybrid. Next year, start your own plants from nonhybrid seed.)
2. Cut in half across middle of tomato, not top to bottom.
3. Squeeze the seeds into container. Don't worry if some pulp gets in there too.
4. Let the stuff ferment for three days, stirring twice a day, or until a layer of mold appears. This is a stinky affair, so safely store said smelly seeds.
5. Add water, agitate and drain off mold. Rinse the seeds until they are clean.
6. Drain and place on glass dish to dry.
7. Stir for even and quick drying.
8. When dry, seal in airtight container, in cool dry area or freeze long term.

The gelatinous covering of the seed must be rotted off because it contains chemicals that inhibit germination. Hence the funky fermentation which, by the way, also kills seed-born disease. How convenient. How amazing. The mysteries of nature and the interconnectedness of us all.

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chapter event last spring was this editor's first introduction to heirloom varieties and seed saving, and her passion for the subject was contagious. Thanks, Judi!

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