

HOME-GARDEN

'The real power of heirloom plants': Preserving our diverse garden heritage

Steve Conaway Special to the Telegram & Gazette USA TODAY NETWORK

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As a teenager I enjoyed helping my parents in the vegetable garden, but I would always dread when the abundance of our harvest moved inside and my mother began the long and arduous task of processing what felt like an infinite pile of produce. Boiling jars of tomato sauce for hours in the sweltering heat of August was an unpleasant chore. Later, while visiting my friend Will Bonsall, a farmer, author and renowned seed-saver, I noticed he had rows of plum tomatoes still green by the end of September. Will grew the gradually ripening heirloom variety 'Royal Chico' specifically to avoid the sauna-like conditions of working over a hot stove in mid-summer. He could harvest and hang the entire plants in his cellar and get to the task of processing them when they were fully ripe in late October. While most new tomato varieties boast early harvests, this old-fashioned one addressed the particular needs of the gardener who is too sweaty and bothered to be in the kitchen during summer.

Heirloom garden plants are old varieties that are open-pollinated, allowing home gardeners to save seed and preserve the plant's unique adaptations, flavors, and appearance for generations. Modern hybrid seeds convey many useful attributes for the home gardener, but do not produce seed true to type and require dependence on companies that will not guarantee carrying a gardener's favorite variety in the future.

Consolidation of seed production worldwide has resulted in a streamlined system that has abandoned many older and niche varieties. Seeds are offered to meet the

needs of larger growers and preference is given to features such as early harvest and ease of transport, often ignoring the unique needs of local garden plots or diverse cultural uses.

We rarely apply the term “extinction” to garden plants, but the same plight that faces iconic megafauna like black rhinos is shared by rare lineages of potatoes and carrots occupying dwindling space under our garden soil. Once extinct, these vegetable varieties are lost forever, along with their living connections to the people and customs that cultivated them.

Like a dusty family heirloom that "Antiques Roadshow" reveals to be worth a fortune, heirloom vegetables passed down through generations can also hold unexpected value. Beyond their deliciously unique attributes for the home gardener, their genetic diversity can hold the key to breeding new and adaptable varieties that address future challenges. Disease resistance, climate resilience, or even unique culinary uses can be buried in the genes of humble home vegetables.

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The real power of heirloom plants is in their active use in gardens and kitchens. At New England Botanic Garden, where I serve as Director of Horticulture, we showcase a wide variety of heirloom varieties to the thousands of home gardeners that pass through the Vegetable Garden each year, offering inspirational introductions. Through experimentation and regular use of these varieties, gardeners can rediscover the rich history of practical uses that brought these varieties into existence. And by gardening with heirlooms, you can preserve the living connections to our diverse garden heritage.

There are many small farms and organizations that actively connect the public with heirloom plants. [Seed Saver's Exchange](#) has become a national hub for heirloom seed exchange and information and is a good place to start exploring. As you put spade in soil and begin to build your garden for the season, make room for heirloom plants that can bring unique and unexpected delight to your space.

Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.