

What's the Big Deal about Heirloom Seeds?

By Annie Mollock, Gallatin Empire Garden Club

An heirloom plant is considered to be a plant that has been available for 50 years and can be propagated from its seeds. Hybrid seeds are not heirloom seeds. Hybrid seeds have been genetically altered in one way or another. The altering of these hybrid seeds sometimes produce a bigger flower but the flower will have lost all its wonderful aroma. Heirloom seeds may produce smaller flowers but they will be more colorful and have beautiful scents. Hybrid seeds can not be guaranteed to reproduce a plant that looks like the original plant that produced the seeds. Simply put.....heirloom seeds are pure and natural, hybrid seeds are not.

There are still many heirloom seeds available through seed companies specializing in heirloom varieties. There are also seed trusts and historic seed programs formed by gardeners who wish to preserve our wonderful heirloom seed heritage.

A list of these seed companies, trusts and historic seed programs can be found in Strickland, S., 1998: *Heirloom Vegetables*. Simon Schuster. NY. 191 pp.

Heirloom Gardens

Planting an heirloom garden can be extremely rewarding, especially if you study the origin of the seeds. Did you know that Thomas Jefferson was an avid gardener? After he left the White House in 1809, he moved to Monticello where he grew 170 varieties of fruits and 330 varieties of vegetables and herbs, until his death in 1826. Jefferson collected seeds and cuttings from all over the world, such as "**Purple Calabash**" tomatoes, which are an almost black acidic tasting tomato with a heavily lobed shape, **Sea kale** whose leaves are large, ruffled and a bluish green color and produce little round seed pods, and **Egyptian onions**, whose tall green stalks bear funny little hats of tiny seeds and wavy green sprouts. He would share his seeds and cuttings with neighbors, who usually had better luck growing them than he did. Jefferson was an adventurous gardener who tried many things and had many failures of which he said "the failure of one thing is repaired by the success of another." One of his discoveries happened when a plague of insects descended on Monticello while he was away. He was convinced that the problem occurred because his plants were weak due to bad soil. He believed that "when the earth is rich it bids defiance to droughts, yields in abundance and of the best quality." We now know that there is a definite connection between fertile soil and plant health.

Today, gardeners plant heirlooms gardens in all sorts of ways. The Museum of the Rockies Living History Farm in Bozeman, Montana has several fabulous heirloom gardens, including a Lewis and Clark Garden, Tinsley House Wildflower Garden, Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden, an Eastern Native American Garden, a Small Grain Garden and a Children's Garden. Each garden grows different varieties of heirloom seeds in different ways. You can tour these gardens in the summer and it is well worth your time! Some of the plants you will find there are: **Globe Amaranth** which are grown from seed that came from Monticello and Williamsburg gardens. Popular in early 1700 English gardens the globe amaranths were considered to be an emblem of friendship; **Blanket Flower or Gaillardias**, a native Rocky Mountain flower and **Blue Flax**, a wild flower that grew along the Missouri River in Montana, both collected by Lewis and Clark in 1806 and sent back to Thomas Jefferson; **A Hopi Black Bean**, grown by Native American tribes from the Southwest to the northeastern coast; **Sunflowers**, grown by the Incas; **Wheat, Barley, Oats and Spelt**; and 12 varieties of heirloom **Corn** that range in color from red, purple, white blue, yellow, black, clay red and spotted.

Collecting and growing heirloom seeds is a healthy, self-sustaining, interesting, fun way to garden. Why not try adding two or three varieties to your garden this year. I guarantee you'll be "hooked" once you taste, smell and feel the flowers and vegetables they produce.

References for this article: Heaton, Jack: Museum of the Rockies, 2009: "*Living History Farm Garden Guide*"

Raver, Anne: New York Times, June 30, 2010 "*At Monticello, Jefferson's Methods Endure*"