

A SEED IS...

BY HELEN KRAYENHOFF

A seed is the amazing container that holds the promise of future abundant harvest. It never fails to amaze me that a small tomato seed can grow into a six-foot-tall plant covered with hundreds of bright bite-sized tomatoes in just a few months.

In a more serious and global view, seeds are the future of our food supply. Over the past decades, the availability of many different varieties of seeds has steeply declined because several corporations have bought up many small seed houses. These large seed companies have focused much of their R&D on new varieties that meet the needs of industrial agriculture, where, for example, hundreds of acres are planted with one variety of tomato that ships well. These kinds of growing conditions require pesticides and herbicides, and they deplete the soil of important nutrients. These seeds rarely meet the needs of the home gardener. Nor do they have the flavor, color and shape, or connection to the variety's history.

Several decades ago, it became apparent that backyard gardeners were interested in the preservation of the old varieties. Some of these good people took up the call with great fervor, and now a treasure trove of seeds (including once-popular varieties from now-defunct seed companies) is reappearing. Some of those seed-savers have made their work into a business. Many others support this work by ordering seeds from these savers' catalogs. Go online to seedsavers.org to see what I mean. At that site you can join the 33-year-old Seed Savers Exchange (SSE) and download or order their catalog, which allows you to order seeds for hundreds of varieties of heirloom vegetables. SSE also publishes the *Garden Seed Inventory*, now in its sixth edition. The inventory lists all non-hybrid seeds available in the United States and Canada and additionally shows all the varieties that have been dropped over the last 20 years.

It's great to support the heirloom seed businesses, and it's even better to find local venues to get these gems. Seed saved from plants grown right here in the Bay Area are more adapted to local environmental stresses and become much hardier and acclimated as a result. Seed swaps, whether informal affairs between neighbors and friends or organized by local interest groups, revive an old common custom of maintaining gene pool diversity. Saving seed is an ancient skill that is easily learned (see *Resources* below.) To make sure the varieties stay pure (if this matters to you) you'll also need to learn about separating similar varieties in your garden. If you want an easier route to seed gathering, go to a local nursery, they carry many great packaged choices as well.

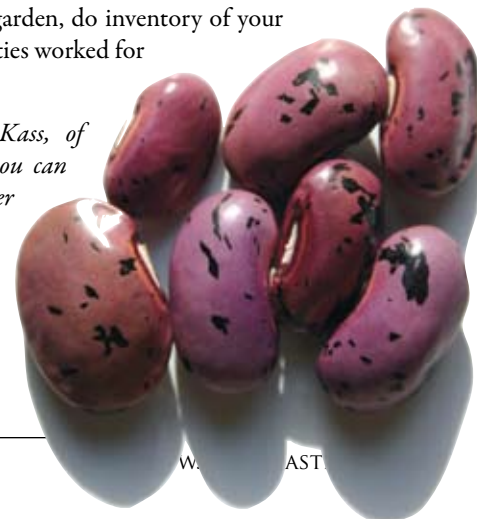
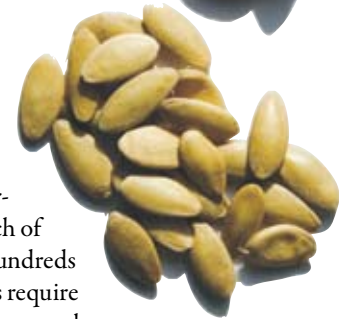
Sometimes the best veggies emerge as volunteers from last year's fallen fruit or seed pods. If you planted hybrids last year, you may not get fruits that come true but you may have something you like even better. If your compost isn't hot enough to kill seeds, that's another place interesting seedlings can emerge in your garden. These *volunteers* know when to germinate, so the guesswork of when to plant is removed.

Some seeds can be planted directly into the ground, others need to be planted in a warm place first and then transplanted once they have put on some growth. Warm-season crops such as tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, and squash should be started indoors earlier in the season and transplanted out into your garden when the weather warms.

If it's still too cold and wet outside to plant, use the time to plan your garden, do inventory of your old seed, and talk to your friends and neighbors about what varieties worked for them in previous years.

Helen Krayenhoff is co-owner, with her partner Peggy Kass, of Kassenhoff Growers, a local organic plant nursery, which you can find at kassenhoffgrowers.com She is also an illustrator, and her drawings are often found gracing the pages of this magazine. Look for her work at helenkrayenhoff.com

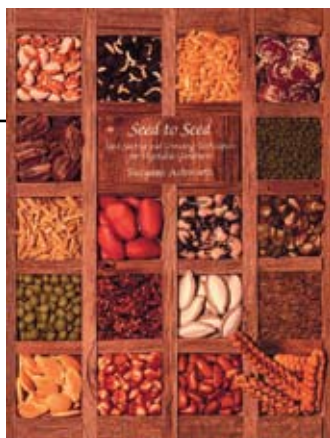
NAME THAT SEED: It's a contest! Identify the seeds on this page and win a tomato start from Kassenhoff Growers. Turn to page 45 for details.



RESOURCES

Seed to Seed and Growing Techniques for the Vegetable Gardener, by Suzanne Ashworth, Seed Savers Exchange. A great book on seed saving.

The Bay Area Seed Interchange Library (BASIL) is a free seed interchange library housed at the Ecology Center, 2530 San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley. They also offer seed saving classes and seed swaps. ecologycenter.org/basil/



Heirloom seeds catalogues:

Many seed companies have signed the "Safe Seed Pledge," which in part confirms that they do not knowingly buy or sell genetically engineered seeds or plants (see below).

Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds: rareseeds.com

Fedco Seeds—Co-op Seed Packers: fedcoseeds.com

Southern Exposure Seed Exchange: southernexposure.com

Tomato Fest: tomatofest.com

The Safe Seed Pledge

"Agriculture and seeds provide the basis upon which our lives depend. We must protect this foundation as a safe and genetically stable source for future generations. For the benefit of all farmers, gardeners and consumers who want an alternative, we pledge that we do not knowingly buy or sell genetically engineered seeds or plants. The mechanical transfer of genetic material outside of natural reproductive methods and between genera, families or kingdoms, poses great biological risks as well as economic, political, and cultural threats. We feel that genetically engineered varieties have been insufficiently tested prior to public release. More research and testing is necessary to further assess the potential risks of genetically engineered seeds. Further, we wish to support agricultural progress that leads to healthier soils, to genetically diverse agricultural ecosystems, and ultimately to healthy people and communities."

Seed Saving Terminology

Open pollinated plants are genetically stable. You can save seed from an open pollinated variety and expect to get the same plant.

Heirloom/heritage seeds are from open pollinated plant varieties that are at least 50 years old. They often were brought to this country by immigrants, and have been saved by families for generations. Some are old commercial varieties that were dropped and have been saved by gardeners.

Hybrid plants are intentional crosses made by cross-pollinating two open pollinated varieties. They are not genetically modified. When seeds saved from these plants are grown out, they may not "come true." This can be surprisingly good or just disappointing.

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