

Defining Heirlooms

What is an heirloom vegetable?

Unfortunately, the term “heirloom” has lost some of its special meaning due to its popularity and overuse. At Heritage Farm, we classify heirlooms simply as “varieties that have a history of being grown and shared within a family or community.”

By Jenna Sicuranza, SSE Curator

In *Gathering: Memoir of a Seed Saver* (2011), Diane Ott Whealy writes of receiving morning glory seeds from her grandfather, Baptist John Ott:

He gave us a few of the tiny black seeds in a white cardboard pillbox and mentioned that the morning glories came to St. Lucas [Iowa] when my great-grandparents emigrated from Bavaria. I could feel my imagination simmering, and soon I could see my distant relatives in Germany. They were waking up as these same purple morning glories opened to the sun. [...] Now we would become part of that family tradition. We would keep the seed and the story of Grandpa Ott's morning glory alive.

After Grandpa Ott's death, Diane realized that she was the last surviving link in the chain of stewardship that had kept her family's morning glory blooming for so long. It was this realization that inspired Diane and Kent Whealy to start the True Seed Exchange and that ultimately led them to found Seed Savers Exchange (SSE). 'Grandpa Ott's' morning glory now grows every year on the side of the barn at Heritage Farm and is sold in the SSE catalog, through which it finds its way into gardens across the country. With a story of seed being passed down through generations – from distant relatives in the “old country”, to the son of immigrants, to the granddaughter with fond memories of her grandfather's morning glories growing every year on his porch – it's easy to see that 'Grandpa Ott's' morning glory is a true heirloom variety, as rich with personal history as it is with natural beauty.

This is just one example of the countless heirloom varieties that are a part of America's rich gardening heritage. Heirlooms are a hot topic on the gardening scene these days, and for good reason – the world of heirloom plants

offers incredible diversity. But if you poke around the internet or browse through seed catalogs, you may end up confused about what the term “heirloom” actually means in regards to plant varieties. Common interpretations often include a time frame, such as plants that were grown over 100 years ago, before 1950, or before World War II. Other interpretations reference a human connection, using language such as “saved by a family for at least three generations.” In a very basic sense, the term is often used to mean “old-timey,” or from an age gone by.

At Heritage Farm, we classify heirlooms simply as “varieties that have a history of being grown and shared within a family or community.” The most important element in this definition is not a specific time frame or year of origin, but a tie to a specific group of people – in the way that 'Grandpa Ott's' morning glory is tied to the Ott family. Unfortunately, the term “heirloom” often loses this special meaning due to its popularity and overuse.

A term that applies more generally to “old-timey” varieties – or those originating before the onset of modern agricultural practice – is “heritage.” This is inclusive of heirloom varieties with a long history, but also covers historically important commercial varieties that do not have a particular tie to a family or community.

SSE's mission to conserve and promote the garden heritage of the United States extends beyond varieties with an “old-timey” history. Though a seemingly contradictory term, “modern heirlooms” are preserved in the SSE Preservation Collection alongside heritage heirlooms. The history of a modern heirloom may have only begun 20 years ago, but its value is found in its connection to a specific group of people, not in its age. The creation of family heirlooms did not end in the early part of the 20th century – you could take the first step in creating your family's heirloom by saving seed today.

More recent open-pollinated commercial varieties are also worthy of conservation if they have demonstrated staying-power or sustained popularity on the market. An excellent example of such a variety is 'Green Zebra' tomato which was bred by Thomas Wagner of Tater Mater Seeds and introduced in 1983. This is an extremely popular modern commercial variety that is often misidentified as an heirloom simply because of its unique characteristics.

The following page contains examples of heritage varieties from the SSE preservation collection.

Opposite: Ben Quisenberry's collection, photo by Victor Schrager, courtesy of Amy Goldman Fowler.



Family Heirlooms

'ITALIAN BLACK' COWPEA

A family heirloom from SSE member Mark Santangelo of Massachusetts. The Santangelo family brought this variety to the United States when they emigrated from Sicily in the early 1900s. Mark received the variety from his father, Salvatore, and Salvatore received it from his father, Agatino. The variety produces black seeds and has a mostly sprawling habit and pods with purple pigmentation. Mark harvests young pods to avoid stringiness and cooks them like a string bean served with tomato sauce. *Pictured at left.*



'WILDWOOD PUMPKIN' SQUASH

A family heirloom from Molly Neely-Burnam of Georgia. This variety has a history with Molly's paternal ancestors – who all lived and gardened in Wildwood, GA – that extends back to her great-great-great grandfather, William Carroll. Molly, her father, and her grandfather all still grow the variety today. In her donation letter Molly writes, "Family oral history places the origin of the variety with the Cherokee Indians who were present in the Wildwood area prior to their 1838 removal." The variety produces pale orange pumpkins that the family primarily uses for pies. *Pictured at left.*

Historically Important Commercial Varieties

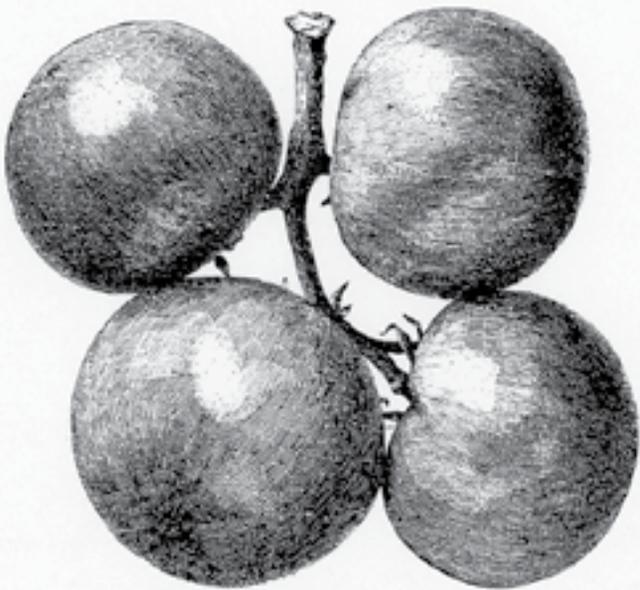
'EARLY DETROIT' TOMATO

As a 1938 Special Bulletin published by Michigan State University describes, "This is chiefly a market garden sort, formerly popular in the Gulf region for shipment in the unripe state but now largely superseded for that purpose by Gulf State Market. It is also a popular home garden variety farther north. Developed by D.M. Ferry & Co. by selection from a crop grown from what was probably Early Leavenworth received from G. Rozendal of Leavenworth, Kans., in 1907. It was introduced in 1909 as Early Detroit."

'BRANDYWINE' TOMATO

'Brandywine' is an excellent example of how the term "heirloom" is often misapplied. This is one of the first varieties many people may think of when they hear the words 'heirloom tomato' – yet it may not actually be an heirloom in the truest sense of the word. As William Woys Weaver points out in *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening*, "In spite of the mythology surrounding Brandywine and its supposed Amish origins, the tomato is a commercial variety. It was introduced in January 1889 by the Philadelphia seed firm of Johnson & Stokes." 'Brandywine' is undoubtedly a heritage variety with a long history on the American gardening scene, but – with no specific familial ties – not a true heirloom. Things become a bit more complicated, however, when you consider varieties like 'Sudduth's Brandywine.' This is a strain of the original 'Brandywine', grown by the Sudduth family for nearly 100 years. Heirloom strains of commercial varieties are not uncommon; after decades of human selection, a once common commercial variety may develop into a unique family heirloom.

Preliminary Wholesale Price List of
SEEDS IN BULK
D. M. FERRY & CO.
 DETROIT, MICH.



EARLY DETROIT TOMATO

Largest and best in shape of the smooth, sleek, purplish pink tomatoes. Larger than Acme and earlier maturing than Beauty. An exceptionally valuable addition to this class.

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Community Heirlooms

'HINKELHATZ' PEPPER

In his book *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening* (1997), William Woys Weaver describes 'Hinkelhatz' as "among the oldest varieties of hot pepper preserved by the Pennsylvania Dutch", cultivated by that community for "well over 150 years." A hot pepper, this variety is traditionally used for pickles and hot sauces. The variety's name – meaning "chicken heart" – describes the shape and size of the fruit. The fruit are most commonly red or yellow, but a rare orange variant is possible as well.

'SWYGMAN FAMILY' BEAN

Brought to the United States by the Swygman family who emigrated from Germany in 1855 with a community of families of the Reformed faith. This variety was known and grown by many families in this community, who eventually settled near Stewartville, MN. It is still grown by many of the descendants of these families today. One such descendant, Donald Smidt, remembers how his grandmother would string the pods of this variety in the attic to dry. The variety is a pole bean with yellow pods (wax beans) and produces large white seeds.



'HINKELHATZ' PEPPER