

1948 SEED CATALOG



BILLY HEPLER

America's Youngest Seed Grower

Novelties, Specialties
and
Heirloom Beans

Billy Hepler Seed Co.
Durham, New Hampshire

America's Youngest Seed Grower

By Bill Hepler

The 1997 Harvest Edition, featured an article about the origins of the word "Heirloom." Kent Whealy wrote, "I remember that the first time I ever saw the word "heirloom" applied to plants was on the cover of one of John Withee's issues of Wanigan Associates...I asked John if he minded me using the term. He said, "Heck no. I stole it too." John Withee had first heard the term

heirloom applied to plants by J.R. Hepler, father of Billy Hepler, "America's Youngest Seed Grower." Bill Hepler later wrote to SSE telling the story of his seed company, his father, and the use of the word "heirloom."

"My father was J.R. Hepler (Jesse Raymond) and generally referred to as "Hep." He came from Mahantonga Valley in

Pennsylvania. He was of Pennsylvania German heritage and never lost an accent that was peculiar to that valley. After graduating from high school and teaching in a one room grade school for three or four years he went to Penn State College getting a degree in horticulture in 1912. He then went to the University of Wisconsin where he taught, did research, got an MS degree, and a wife (Norwegian of course). He went to the University of New Hampshire in 1917 where he spent the rest of his life teaching, researching, and working with extension activities. He was the vegetable person at the university and was trained in plant breeding. He was called on to judge, primarily vegetables but other commodities, at county fairs and saw an array of different varieties.

He developed an interest in beans because of the many different types that he saw and began collecting them. My father started his bean collection in 1919 after he came to New Hampshire and started to judge at county fairs.

He wrote, "the most striking thing in the vegetable exhibits was the large number of varieties of beans exhibited. I started collecting them and I am afraid I took

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some without permission. I never came home from a fair without three, four or five new beans in my pocket, and soon I had 150 different samples." People also sent him samples of beans they were growing. He went on to write, "We call those beans which have been grown for many years in one neighborhood, but which have never found their way into commerce, Heirloom Beans. The letters that we received from the people who sent in the beans were very interesting. There are records of beans having been in a family anywhere from 75 to 150 years." He collected beans until he died.

He knew these were germplasm resources maintained by families and handed down through the generations. In



BILLY HEPLER

This is the BILLY HEPLER SEED COMPANY'S first catalog. We hope that you will find some item in it that will make your garden more interesting or more productive.

The BILLY HEPLER SEED COMPANY will bring you novelties and new varieties especially suited to the short summers of the north. Some of these like the Tiny Tim tomato or the M13 sweet corn are designed for the home garden or the road side stand alone. Others like the Merrimack Wonder pepper, Early Chatham tomato, Butternut squash, and the Flash bean have found commercial acceptance. Still others like the Soldier and the Jacob's Cattle beans are widely grown in northern New England and yet have never found their way into commercial channels.

All the seed offered is grown locally and is therefore more expensive than commercially grown seed. In some cases very little seed is available. However, we are glad to share with you what little we have. If you like to experiment we hope you will try some of the heirloom beans. Many of them date back to the Indians who loved their brilliant colors.

TOMATO

TINY TIM—An introduction of the Horticultural Dept., University of New Hampshire. This is a dwarf tomato with small fruit. It may be started in August, transplanted to a five inch

his family they maintained many of their own varieties. He felt these plant varieties were as valuable as pieces of furniture, jewelry and trinkets that were handed down through generations. As far as I can tell he started using the term heirloom varieties with respect to the beans in the late 30's because these varieties were indeed family treasures. He then used the term for all varieties that had been maintained by families through generations.

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and

Heirloom Beans

Billy Hepler Seed Co.

Durham, New Hampshire

We are now two years old. The BILLY HEPLER SEED COMPANY again offers you novelties and varieties especially suited to the short, cool summers of the north. Also for your convenience a list of standard varieties, all of which have been carefully tested in both Durham and West Stewartstown, New Hampshire. They are chosen for both home garden and commercial use with special reference to quality. The novelties are both interesting and useful. Gardeners like the GIANT SOLDIER and BUMBLE BEE beans. The five varieties of sweet corn are the best we could find.

Practically all our seed is grown in New Hampshire. A few items are still scarce. However, we are glad to share with you what little we have.

My father was a plant breeder. He developed the 'New Hampshire' eggplant which received an All-America Selection medal in 1939. He also developed the 'Merrimack Wonder' pepper, 'Merrimack Sweetheart' watermelon, 'Rainbow' and 'New Hampshire Golden' popcorns and 'Flash' and 'Brilliant horticultural beans.' Hep wrote, "I wondered if the red pods of the 'French Horticultural' could be combined with the red bean which is commonly called 'Vermont Cranberry' or 'Souhegan.' I crossed the two and after a number of years of selection two beans were found with both red pods and red beans." 'Flash' was a dwarf and 'Brilliant' had short runners like the 'French Horticultural' parent. A student that worked with him on the project was Elwyn Meader. El later developed improvements on these varieties with 'Shelleasy,' 'Scarlett Beauty' and 'Red Shellout.'

In 1944 my father brought some tomato seed home and suggested I raise some seed. The variety was 'Tiny Tim.' I raised about a pound of seed and sold it to Max Schling Seedsmen in New York City. I got \$80 for that pound of seed, big money for an 11 going on 12 year old kid.

The next year I raised considerably more seed of the same variety for the same source and made even more money and started getting some mail order requests. That year, I also raised seed crops of 'Tiny Tim' and 'Window Box' tomatoes, 'Merrimack Wonder' pepper and 'Merrimack Sweetheart' watermelon. I started receiving some good publicity.

By 1946 I had 20 items of which I was growing seed and decided to put out a seed list which I did with the help of my father. The first catalog came out in January, 1947, and had 21 varieties of eight different vegetables. The printer added the "America's Youngest Seed Grower" line. On the cover of the list for 1947, 1948 and 1949 I used the phrase "Novelties, Specialties and Heirloom Beans."

In 1949 a more complete line of vegetable varieties were added. We added varieties that performed well in the northeast. I dropped the "America's Youngest Seed Grower" for the 1950 catalog. The list of offerings grew each year and expanded beyond vegetable varieties. Strawberry and raspberry plants were added in 1950 and bee supplies in 1952.

I bought a tractor in 1948 for the seed growing operation. I had several isolation plots in the area so I could grow more than one variety of a cross-pollinating species. In 1951 a 60-acre parcel was purchased, about 30 acres was

tillable, the remainder was forested.

My younger brother, Peter, worked with me during the entire period I had the company. He continued to help my father until he graduated from college and went on to graduate school.

Many of the beans I listed were given to me or my father by individuals. In 1950 a gentleman by the name of Ernie Champagne gave me a white-seeded, green podded, pole bean. He told me I would need 20 foot poles. I half believed him and put in 10-foot poles. He was right; I could have used 20-foot poles. Thus was named 'Champagne' pole bean which we offered for sale in 1952.

A woman in Maine had a red-seeded lima bean that germinated better in cold soils. This was the 'Cowey' Lima name after Mrs. Cowey. The USDA used it in the lima bean breeding program in 1948.

I left Durham in 1955 after graduating from UNH to continue my graduate education. My father took over the company as he was close to retirement from the University and this would keep him busy. My father died in 1962 and the germplasm, mailing lists, etc. were sold to Farmer Seed & Nursery Co.

In the summer of 1955 I went to the Pennsylvania State University and received an MS degree in Horticulture with an emphasis on plant breeding. In February of 1957 I went to the University of Illinois for further study and received a PhD in Horticulture in 1961 with an emphasis on plant breeding. I was also a faculty member for a short period. I moved to California in 1962 and worked as a tomato breeder for the California Packing Corporation and in 1965 to the Seed Department of FMC Corporation where I was in charge of Research and Foundation Seed and worked on most of the vegetable crops. I moved back to the Horticulture Department of the Pennsylvania State University in 1970 where I worked as a plant breeder and taught Plant Breeding, Vegetable Crops Production and initiated a course on Organic Gardening. I became head of the Horticulture Department in 1973.

I moved back to California in 1978 and worked in the vegetable produce, vegetable seed, and greenhouse vegetable plant production industries working in plant variety development, vegetable seed physiology, and vegetable seed pathology.

I retired from my consulting business in 2003 and moved to Loveland, Colorado in 2004 and now I am able to spend time in my own vegetable garden, grow lilacs and dahlias.

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