

Endangered Foods: So What Is an ‘Heirloom’?

Everywhere in our farmers’ markets, but what are they?

STORY BY *Pria Graves*

OLDER VARIETIES OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES are often referred to as “heirlooms” but just what does this mean? Simply put, it’s a variety that has been in cultivation for a long time. But how long is long? And is longevity sufficient?

Unfortunately there is no short answer.

Leaving aside plants propagated from cuttings or tubers for the present, let’s consider crops grown annually from seed, including most vegetables.

I started this series by discussing the transformation of seeds from legacy to commodity, from a treasure to be saved to something to be purchased each year. This transition has its roots in the 1800s with the advent of commercial seed companies. Initially they offered choice varieties selected from among those already being grown.

This new distribution mechanism encouraged farmers to try unfamiliar varieties. While this led to the disappearance of many locally adapted types, there was still nothing to prevent growers from saving seed for the following year. Barring accidental cross-pollination, the saved seeds would “come true,” producing a nearly-identical crop the following year. Plants with this trait are called “open pollinated.”

The earliest open pollinated (OP) varieties originated with plants discovered in gardens and on farms that stood out as better - tastier, more productive, more beautiful. Then, as our understanding of genetics improved, breeders began to create intentional crosses, selecting for desirable characteristics. In either case, the variety was stabilized through multiple generations before being released commercially.

Over time, farmers and gardeners became accustomed to the ease and convenience of buying seed. And then, after WWII, suppliers began moving away from offering open pollinated seeds in favor of F1 hybrids. F1 stands for first filial generation, seeds produced by manually crossing two pure lines anew each year. The resulting plants are typically very uniform and

have the added benefit of “hybrid vigor,” an extra bit of oomph shown by first generation crosses. But unfortunately seed saved from these plants will generally not come true, so growers can no longer save seed but have to buy it again each year – a real boon to the seed companies! Within a few years almost all commercially available seeds were F1s and many older varieties had vanished.

So this brings us back to heirlooms.

First, it’s generally agreed that heirlooms must be open pollinated since F1 hybrids cannot be passed along. It’s also accepted that age is important but beyond that consensus evaporates. One school of thought insists that heirloom varieties be 100 years old while others set the age at 50. And yet another group

cuts it off around 1950 with the widespread introduction of F1 hybrids. Most people include “commercial heirlooms,” varieties introduced by seed houses generations ago, but there are also purists who acknowledge only seeds selected and handed down within a family, true “family heirlooms.”

To make matters even more confusing, we now see “new” heirloom tomatoes appearing in markets. Bradley Gates, tomato-breeder extraordinaire and owner of Wild Boar Farms, admits that most people think it’s an heirloom if it isn’t round, red, and tasteless. But he doesn’t call his delicious new varieties heirlooms yet. Instead, he describes them as “Heirlooms of the Future.”

So there is no single answer. Having collected, grown, and painted heirlooms for more than 20 years, I personally favor a broad interpretation, including commercial and intentionally developed varieties that have survived for 50 years or more. I also agree with Brad that open pollinated varieties being developed today may merit the title when they’ve survived for a generation or more. But my favorites are still seeds with stories, plants nurtured and passed along for decades by caring individuals.

Finally, as if this saga wasn’t muddled enough, the British prefer the term “heritage” to “heirloom.” Go figure! 🍅



AT LEFT. *Solanum lycopersicum* ‘Hopkins Stewart Longkeeper’, 9.5”x12.5”, watercolor, ©Pria Graves, 2009. This is an old, ‘pass-along’ variety. **ABOVE.** *Solanum lycopersicum* ‘Beauty King’, 8.5”x11”, colored pencil, ©Mary Ellen King, 2015. A future heirloom tomato from Wild Boar Farms.