

Heirloom Fruit and Vegetables

Food writer Shirlee Posner looks into traditional varieties of fruit and vegetables

Some chefs are proud of the provenance of their ingredients and it's not unusual to see heritage or heirloom mentioned on menus particularly in reference to tomatoes.

In the south east of England we are lucky to have tomato grower Gary Griffiths supplying farm shops and restaurants with his gorgeous full-flavoured tomatoes. These include specialist cultivars. His company, Nutbourne, grows under glass in West Sussex, selling to farm shops and restaurants who just can't seem get enough of his delicious fruits. This year he says that he could have sold twice as many of his bright orange cherry tomatoes and will double his crop next season.

He buys his seed from seed houses, who provide him with high yield, fertile seeds. Paying £1 each for these he is guaranteed that the 16,000 seeds he plants will grow into productive plants. Growing nearly 30 different varieties of tomatoes that all need slightly different care is a specialist job. Gary is famous for his heirloom/heritage tomatoes so I asked him what that term means to him.

Heritage and heirloom are terms used for traditional varieties of vegetables (not just tomatoes) that were grown on farms and in gardens. Post-war modern techniques for growing and the demand for higher yields have impacted on the range of varieties of all vegetables for sale. In addition large supermarkets moved from buying produce from wholesalers to working directly with farmers and dictating seed type. This gave them uniformity for their shops. Seed houses are able to create hybrids of cultivars (a practice started in the 1900's) to control size of fruit, yield and disease resistance too.

Straight cucumbers, leeks and uniform carrots have been achieved by creating hybrids all good for supermarket shelves, but not always for their flavour.

Conservationists are concerned that as commercial seed houses are reducing the number of seeds available and hence the variety, many traditional varieties of plants will be lost. Hybrids (where two cultivars have been combined) cannot be used to harvest seed as many of these will be sterile. If seeds are successfully grown they will revert to one of the parent's type. The term true-type is used here to describe the growing of a seed harvested from a plant that will be the same as its parent. Heirloom seeds are those that have been retained in their original genetic form as close to the original parent plant as possible.

Heirloom seeds are from traditional cultivars that were passed down through farming families who harvested seed as part of their natural work. Depending on where you live in the world your local environment (weather and soil) will affect the way the plant develops over time and this was part of their unique history and eating quality. Modern seed houses started to emerge from the 1900's when the technique to create hybrids was first developed.

Another term that's important here is open pollination and sometimes on heritage or heirloom packs you will see OP next to the seed type. This indicates that the seed has come from plants that have been pollinated by insects, birds, wind or humans. The plants are more diverse and make changes to adapt to the local environment. So this backs up why some fruit and vegetables taste so different depending on where they are grown. The slight problem here is if different varieties of the same plants are grown close to each other they will not remain true to type.

If you save seed your plants next season may share the characteristics of the variety it grew next to for example

smaller size fruit. Farmers know this so don't plant different cultivars close to each other. In hybrid plants the pollination has been created by human intervention although some open pollination will occur too. However it's when you want to harvest seed for the next season that the real difference is clear. Growers who use hybrid seeds have to buy new seed each year and this can be expensive. For farmers in low-income countries there has been criticism when seed aid has been given that if the seeds are hybrid the farmers are unable harvest seed. There is also concern that people will lose the skill of seed conservation and become dependent on buying seed or starve.

Gary, like many commercial growers, has to tread a fine line between choosing seeds which will provide a fantastic end product but also have high enough yields to make them commercially viable. He also grows insecticide-free produce, which means purchasing disease resistant hybrids is essential to his success. But as he pointed out, losing varieties is a sad part of the modern food system. One of the tomatoes he has been growing which his customers love is a Tiger tomato with distinctive stripes and a high solid matter, making them perfect for roasting. Lack of demand for this seed means they are being phased out and he in turn will have to de-list them and the species could be lost.

Local growers James and Catherine Dampier of Village Greens in Ockley also offered some insight. They have been growing fruit and vegetables to sell in their two farm shops for the last eight years. They grow on a smaller scale to Gary and grow a wider range of more traditional British crops with a few European favourites like aubergines tossed in too. With their strong ethos on bringing the best-flavoured natural food to their customers they can buy their seeds (organic where possible) from smaller seed houses like Tozers based in Cobham and Chiltern based in the south east. They currently grow heritage varieties of globe artichokes (Green Globe), broad

bean (Aquadulce Claudia) and Crystal Lemon cucumbers but choose their seed carefully. They were also keen to point out that modern breeding can produce better disease resistance so choosing a hybrid seed is often the best option. They have also ventured down the organic route and find that some hybrids are better for them as they need little or no protection against many of the diseases that can have devastating effects on crops.

This is a view also shared by Greg Secrett at Hurst Farm in Milford. He grows an extensive range of produce for his farm shop and his wholesale business. He grows some of this from heirloom seeds which are open pollinated such as Scorzonera also known as 'black salsify'. This delicious tuber is sold directly to the restaurant trade in London where top chefs prize its unusual flavour. But like many other farmers he chooses seed he knows will be reliable and high yielding. He also grows heritage varieties of beetroot, black cabbage, chard and parsley.

Luckily for those of us who grow vegetables for our own use we can be more relaxed and selective over what we choose to grow. We are not maximising yields or worrying about national prices. When I started growing veggies a few years ago I was unaware that my friend Jackie was a seed conservationist. She is an allotment holder and is my 'go to' person for advice. Having a chat recently I found out she is a member of Garden Organic. This organisation encourages organic gardening and is dedicated to preserving our valuable organic heritage. You can become a member of their Heritage Seed Library for a small fee and as part of that will receive six packets of heritage seeds from their catalogue each year. Seeds preserved by this group had been dropped from seed catalogues as new disease resistant hybrids were developed or had become less popular than newer varieties.

Looking through heritage seed collections I have found gorgeous deep red broad beans, mottled runner beans and cool

cucumbers to add to my growing list for next summer. I had no idea the seeds that Jackie gave me were true-type heirloom seeds of traditional varieties of beans, peas, lettuce and cabbage that she carefully harvests at the end of each growing season. I was topping up by buying commercially produced hybrid seeds but now I know better and from next year I will get my first batch of seeds from Garden Organic too.

This means that like Jackie I can save seed from the current harvest to plant next year in a far more sustainable and eco-friendly way of gardening. In addition I will be adding biodiversity to my garden and helping to keep preserve some of our traditional plants for future generations to enjoy.

Shirlee Posner is a food writer www.shirleeposner.co.uk and blogger at www.eatsurrey.co. A champion of local artisan food producers and suppliers her blog focuses on reviewing local independent food companies in Surrey to help raise awareness of the wonderful artisan food our county and those that border it has to offer.

Heritage Seed Library – www.gardenorganic.org.uk/join-us

Secretts Farm Shop is at Hurst Farm, Chapel Lane, Milford near Godalming.

Nutbourne tomatoes are available from many good farm shops and delicatessens throughout the South East including Village Greens Farm Shop in Ockley and Denbies in Dorking.