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## **Scarce and Historic Seeds Are Being Preserved as Heirlooms**

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By Liza N. Burby

- Sept. 6, 1992

School Year Beginning With Relief and Concern

Colleges Enrolling More Older Students

By STEPHEN BELLERMAN

DISCOUNTING the usual statistics, and in a sense, the usual wisdom, it is hard to believe that the number of older students enrolling in colleges has risen so sharply in recent years. Many statistics are based on the fall term, but the number of older students enrolling in colleges has risen so sharply in recent years. Many statistics are based on the fall term, but the number of older students enrolling in colleges has risen so sharply in recent years. Many statistics are based on the fall term, but the number of older students enrolling in colleges has risen so sharply in recent years.



The health-related fields are gaining applicants

THE HEALTH-related fields of public health, nursing, and other health-related professions are attracting more applicants than ever before. This is due to a combination of factors, including the aging population and the need for more health care services.

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Scarcity and Historic Seeds Are Being Preserved as Heirlooms



Cove Miller, founder of the nonprofit Spring Meadow School of Organic Farming and Gardening in St. James, with Elizabeth Kiggen, an assistant, harvesting seeds.

W HILE SOME people do not think of seeds as heirlooms, many do. In fact, many people are saving seeds from their gardens and farms as a way of preserving them for future generations. This is especially true for those who are interested in preserving heirloom seeds, which are seeds that have been passed down from one generation to the next.



Loretta Smith, a Shinnecock Indian who grows more than 50 different native American vegetables on one and a half acres at the Riverhead Reservation.

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WHITE and purple carrots. Petite green tomatoes enclosed in a flower-like shell. Flat pumpkins. Could these vegetables be oddities of the future? On the contrary, these plants, living testaments to an earlier time in the history of American farming, are just some of the heirloom varieties being preserved and planted by several Long Island gardeners. As a result, these vegetables might not only become common additions to the backyard garden; they will also continue to be integral parts of the horticultural gene pool.

Heirlooms are the seeds of herbs, flowers, fruits and vegetables that are open-pollinated; that is, able to produce seeds that duplicate parent plants. Many of these varieties, sometimes referred to as old-fashioned, have been handed down for generations. They differ from modern hybrids, which are cross-pollinated by breeders for specific characteristics, like flavor and disease resistance. Hybrid seeds will not remain true to type if the offspring are planted.

In recent years, efforts to preserve the seeds of long-enduring varieties of fruits, flowers, vegetables and herbs have gained wide attention, thanks largely to the work of Kent Whealy, founder and director of the Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, Iowa. He formed the organization in 1975, when he discovered that many of the varieties that had been grown before the introduction of hybrids in the 1940's were no longer available commercially. And that scarcity has continued. In fact, almost half the seeds that were offered in 1984, when the exchange conducted its last inventory, are no longer available, according to Mr. Whealy's "Garden Seed Inventory," published this year. In addition, many varieties were lost when smaller seed companies were taken over by large conglomerates in the 70's.

People dedicated to the cause are concerned that in a period of rapid climate change and increased use of chemical pesticides, future food supplies could be endangered without the genetic diversity of open-pollinated seeds. The U.S. Department of Agriculture shares such concerns; recognizing the importance of heirlooms, it has established a seed bank in Fort Collins, Colo. Fears of a Blight

John Strong, who teaches a course on Long Island's American Indians at Southampton College, says heirlooms are indeed in jeopardy. "As older breeds are used to reproduce a commercial variety, they are then forgotten," he said. "If a blight were to strike, and hits that hybrid, you can't reproduce it."

Ken Ettlinger, who owns the Long Island Seed Company in Flanders, which maintains more than 2,000 old-fashioned vegetables, at least 400 of which are tomato varieties, said: "Once a variety of these heirloom seeds hasn't been saved, the genes are gone. That's the alarming thing, because a lot of these monoculture hybrids are vulnerable. Wet weather like we've been having this summer could wipe out an entire crop."

The disadvantages of a monoculture -- in which a plant has only a single variety, were highlighted in 1970, when the Southern corn leaf blight, a mutation of a blight-causing fungus, swept through the Midwest corn belt, destroying more than 15 percent of the crop, valued at \$500 million to \$1 billion. American seed companies were able to use old corn varieties to

produce resistant seed, but the blight left many agriculturists aware of the genetic vulnerability of food crops.

"We have no idea what genes plant breeds may need to call upon in the future, and many of the plants may have pharmaceutical importance," said William Sanok, an agent for the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County. "Dedicated amateurs could play an important part in preserving our future." Tasty, and Historic

Mr. Ettlinger acknowledged that heirloom seeds lack large-scale commercial value. "Commercial growers need hybrid seeds," he said, gently handling a softball-sized, bright orange Gold Delicious squash at his Flanders seed company. "Their crops have to ripen uniformly, be machine harvestable, and be able to be transported without damage. Heirlooms can't offer those assurances."

But seed savers say that what heirlooms lack in commercial value they make up for in taste, esthetic quality, heartiness, adaptability and historical significance.

For Lamot Smith, a Shinnecock Indian who grows more than 30 different native American vegetables on one and a half acres on the Riverhead Reservation, raising heirlooms is a way to learn about his heritage.

"It's a wonderful experience to know that I'm growing what my ancestors grew, and to be aware that I am part of that history," Mr. Smith said, standing amid Hopi Blue, an Iroquois corn, on a clear August morning.

Mr. Smith will share the bounty of his garden, which was started by his father 50 years ago, at the tribe's pow wow during the Labor Day weekend. Among his offerings will be yellow, maroon, brown, red and white Navajo popcorns and white, black and brown Tapari beans. He will also use his varieties to prepare American Indian dishes, like stuffed pumpkin and squash blossoms.

"I batter-fry the flowers and then stuff them with beans, corn and squash," he said, gesturing to one of the bright orange-yellow acorn squash flowers. "It has a terrific flavor." Tobacco and Gourds

He will also present his tobacco leaves, *Nicotiana Rustica*, for ceremonial purposes at the pow wow, the traditional tribal conference. "Unlike commercial tobacco, *Nicotiana* has a very short growing season," Mr. Smith said.

Once raised by Indians on Long Island, the tobacco is known for its prolific seed production. Each plant contains one to two dozens capsules, and each capsule contains 500 or more seeds. Mr. Smith also grows Legendary Bottle gourds, once used as ornaments, as rattles and, more commonly, as vessels to store water.

A rich, purple-reddish amaranth, a plant once found all over the United States, makes a striking splash of color in Mr. Smith's garden. Known as the Hopi Red Dye, its protein-rich seeds were used as meal, and the leaves were boiled to produce red dye. Some of the amaranth has a mix of leaf colors. "When you're seed-saving on a small, home scale, the diversity is enjoyable," Mr. Smith said. "Just look: I have purple, yellow and green leaves all growing on one plant."

In addition to growing native vegetables and a few organically grown hybrids that he sells to local markets and restaurants, Mr. Smith is also employing American Indian horticultural practices. He uses seaweed and fish, for example, to provide nutrients for his organic garden. He also grows some vegetables -- like beans, corn and squash -- in mounds. The mounds, he said, loosen the soil, trap heat, retain water and protect the roots. Mexican in Origin

Most of Mr. Smith's seeds, which originated in Mexico, come by way of seed exchanges in Tucson, Ariz., and North Garden, Va. He said the seeds seem to have adapted well to Long Island's sandy soil. One in particular, the Tomatillo Ground Cherry tomato, is thriving. It is a small green tomato that grows within a delicate flower-like shell. It has a meaty texture and a subtle flavor -- until it is picked, Mr. Smith said. Then it becomes very sweet.

"I sometimes have nightmares about eating the last seeds of an important strain," Mr. Smith said, but he added, laughing, "With the Ground Cherry, that shouldn't be a problem. In my garden it has become a weed."

While Mr. Smith is interested in preserving the horticultural heritage of American Indians, Muriel Tatem, of the Old Bethpage Village Restoration, is dedicated to replicating the gardens of the colonists. The demonstration gardens at the restoration span the years 1760 to 1860, and Mrs. Tatem tries to match the gardens with the various historical periods represented by the restoration's six houses, with an emphasis on Long Island crops.

"The gardens are as accurate as we can determine," Mrs. Tatem said. "People didn't write down what seeds they planted in the 18th century, but we can tell from their art books. It became easier after around 1830, when there were more and more gardening books." "Amazed at the Flavor'

The historically accurate gardens at the restoration create a living museum of Long Island history. "We try to show kids and adults that life was very different 150 years ago, but that people also had very good things, including excellent vegetables," Mrs. Tatem said. "People today have no idea of the difference in flavor they enjoyed back then. With today's hybrid, flavor and taste are forgotten. When you taste some of these historic varieties, you're amazed at the flavor. For instance, parsnips have been around for hundreds of years, but what you buy in the store is rather bitter. What commercial growers don't do is leave them in the ground until after the first frost. Then they taste sweet."

Mrs. Tatem, whose father introduced her to gardening "when I was old enough to stand up," said the restoration gardeners also try to do all the farm work by hand. "It's very satisfying work, but at the end of the day, you're tired." She added with a laugh, "But then, that's the way it was."

At one time vegetables like corn salad, which is part of the lettuce family, and salsify, a black root, were common on Long Island's dinner tables. Now they are among the nearly 100 varieties grown at the restoration. Another is the Scarlet Runner bean, grown at the 1766 Schenck House. The bean has been grown for several hundred years and is still sold commercially in England. For a sampling of an 1840 garden, the Kirby House offers the White Portugal onion, which is large and flat with a clear silver white skin. The Hewlett House has the Prague celeriac, which has large, smooth globular bulbs. Turk's Turban green squash, which has a turban-shaped top of orange, red and green, is an 1850 variety grown at the Powell House, the original structure at the restoration. At the Williams garden, also from 1850, the Crosby Egyptian beet, with its flat, heart-shaped roots, grows with many other vegetable varieties. Tennis ball-sized Tom Thumb lettuce, which was usually used whole in a salad, and Bull Nose peppers, which has a spicy-hot skin and a sweet interior, grow at the 1866 Layton gardens.

All of the produce creates a display of vivid colors and unusual shapes at the historic vegetable tent during the Long Island Fair, held at Old Bethpage during the Columbus Day weekend. To Every Seed a Story

The historical aspect of heirlooms is one that few seed savers overlook.

"There is a story behind all of the seeds, which is part of the fun," said Mr. Ettlenger, who in addition to running his Flanders seed company teaches environmental science and horticulture at Suffolk Community College in Riverhead. "But unless you spread the seeds and grow them out so that people can see and taste them, no one will be able to appreciate them."

At his house in Flanders, he grows a portion of the seeds he makes available to more than 1,000 national and international customers. While many of the varieties have been gathered worldwide (like the Belgium White and Purple Afghanistan carrots), Mr. Ettlenger grows a sampling of native Long Island heirlooms as well.

One is the Cutchogue Cheese pumpkin, a flat vegetable with light yellow ridges that resembles a wheel of cheese and that has been growing on the East End for more than 100 years. It is extremely prolific, stores well and has a unique, sweet taste.

Mr. Ettlenger also has Egyptian onions from the old Pilgrim State farm in Edgewood. The bulbs grow in bunches on top of long stalks. When the stalks get too heavy, they collapse, and the bulbs take root, producing more bulbs and plenty of scallions. He also has a relative of the Tomatillo, the Husk Ground cherry tomato. Mr. Ettlenger said he remembers seeing this marble-sized, yellow tomato growing by the roadside when he was growing up in Deer Park.

But the extant native varieties are limited.

"I've gone through booklets and articles that were written by horticulturists about crops that were growing here in the 1800's, and most of them are gone," Mr. Ettlenger said. "When you read the description of what they were, you realize what a loss it is that they weren't saved."

Mr. Ettlinger said consumers today tend to demand uniformity in their produce selection, and he finds that lamentable. "In Mexican markets there is tremendous diversity in vegetables," he said. "Here, everyone looks for the same thing. If something new is introduced in the supermarket, people think it's bad."

For a vivid illustration of the differences between hybrid and heirloom produce, one can visit a farm owned by Peg and Tom Conklin in Water Mill. There, Mr. Ettlinger uses part of the land to grow some of his seeds. In one field are acres of the Conklins' commercial hybrid field corn, large ears grown at an angle about shoulder height so they can be easily machine-harvested. In the next field stand Mr. Ettlinger's Hookers Indian corn, a small-ear variety that originated on the dry, windy Northern Plains and that grows near the base of the stalk, where the ears are less exposed to the wind. It has to be harvested by hand.

But Mr. Ettlinger does have uses for hybrids. "I'm interested in the genetics of seeds," he said. "Even though seed companies tell you not to save hybrid seeds because you won't get the same thing two years in a row, I think it's fun to play with." This year he planted a purple pepper hybrid. His patch is now dappled with lavender, yellow, green and purple peppers. "I like to find out what genes are in there," he said. "You can even save seeds from what you buy in the supermarket." A Tree in Northport

Other Long Island varieties, like Savoy cabbage, Young Beauty pumpkin and the Holly by Golly yew, are being maintained by Long Island families. The Amslers, for example, owners of the Richters Apple Orchard in Northport, grow a single Newtown Pippin apple tree. This yellow fruit was the first American apple to attract European attention. The original tree is alleged to have grown on the estate of Gershom Moore in Newtown, L.I., in the early 18th century. Records indicate it "died of exhaustion" in 1805.

There are a few organized efforts on Long Island to educate consumers to the importance of preserving heirloom seeds. At the Long Island Culture History Lab and Museum on Hoyt Farm in Commack, students from nursery school through college can learn about American Indian planting. Gaynell Stone, an anthropologist and archaeologist who serves as director of the program, said:

"The more everyone can learn about the environment, the more you understand that we are stewards. Native Americans believe in thinking for seven generations ahead, and they survived by saving seeds for the future. We have to do our part to give people an understanding of the history of seeds. For instance, native American women were the ones who selected the best corn seeds to save. They were the empirical genetic biologists, and they didn't get credit for it."

Dr. Stone said the organization hopes to work with Mr. Ettlinger in establishing a demonstration American Indian and Colonial garden next year.

On the premise that consumers can be taught to be self-sufficient, Crow Miller founded the nonprofit Spring Meadow School of Organic Farming and Gardening in St. James in 1982. Mr.

Miller offers classes on saving seeds and has organized an heirloom seed swap, which has about 40 members.

"I encourage people to save seeds so they can have more control over their own food," Mr. Miller said as he walked amid carefully maintained varieties of heirloom potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, beans and spinach. "At the rate things are going, we could have no seeds left in 10 years."

Long Islanders who may wish to taste old-time varieties like the French yellow potato, the two-foot-long Costata Romanesca zucchini and unnamed sweet, thin green beans can visit Spring Meadow. Because the organization is nonprofit, the produce is not for sale, but donations help to keep the farm going. Mr. Miller, who learned farming from the Amish, also runs a Spring Meadow food bank, which distributes food to about 300 needy people a month.

There is an economic reason to save seeds as well. Dr. Stone said the price of hybrid seeds today is prohibitive for many people. But Mr. Sanok, of the Cornell Cooperative Extension in Suffolk, disagrees. He said the real cost in agriculture comes from the fertilizers and pesticides. Seed savers maintain that the advantage to growing heirlooms is that they do not require special attention. Mr. Miller concurs, saying they are hearty treasures, resistant to disease and insects.

But Mr. Sanok warned that seed saving requires education. "It's true that many old varieties are more resistant," he said, "but new diseases can wipe out both heirlooms and hybrids. Seed saving needs to be done in a purposeful way." **SAVING SEEDS IS AN EASY TASK**

Ken Ettlinger of the Long Island Seed Company in Flanders, who grows most of his vegetables only for the seed, said he learned the process of seed saving from his mother, Josephine, whose family had been seed savers and who still keeps viable old varieties in a shoebox in a hall closet in her Deer Park home.

With tomato seeds, for instance, he said one should select seeds from a variety with desirable characteristics like color or heartiness. He explained: "All you do is squeeze the seeds into a cup, and let them ferment for two to three days. The jell surrounding the seeds breaks down, killing seed-borne organisms that could cause problems. It's a very natural process. Then you dump the seeds into a bowl, fill it with water, agitate it a little, and pour all the broken pulp out. The seeds settle on the bottom of the pan. Let them dry on newspaper, and write down what they are, and store them in an envelope in a cool place."

Stored this way, he added, the seeds could last up to 10 years. He also advised not to plant all of the seeds, should the planting prove unsuccessful.

**Correction:** Dec. 31, 1969

Sunday An article and a picture caption on Sept. 6 about the preservation of heirloom seeds referred incorrectly to a Shinnecock Indian who grows 30 different vegetables, and misidentified his home. He was Lamont Smith; his garden is on the Shinnecock Reservation in Shinnecock.



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