

over Story

## Saving the seeds of our forefather seeds of seed Saven

by CYNTHIA ELYCE RUBIN Photos by Ade

## When Tuscurora Indians need

centuries-old corn varieties for ceremonial events, they go to William Woys Weaver.

"It's almost embarrassing that they have to come to me," he muses, but it's the only place to go, because Weaver has seeds that predate America. In fact, he saves, restores, and re-creates more heirloom seed varieties—about 3,000—than perhaps anyone in the country. With corn and beans alone he has roughly 500 varieties, not a one of which will you find in stores.

These are the seeds of our forefathers, the seeds America grew up on—and Weaver saves them because they have characteristics not found in modern hybrids. One of these is taste.

"In the 1970s, commercial tomatoes looked like Christmas tree bulbs, but tasted like cardboard," he says. Not so with the heirlooms, such as the

Brandywine tomato made famous by the Pennsylvania Dutch, or the Minnesota-born potato known as Cranberry Red, a huge potato with pink flesh and purple flowers that Weaver says could be grown for its blossoms alone, if it didn't taste so good. It's Weaver's favorite heirloom.

Weaver lives in Devon, Pa., just outside Philadelphia, in a rambling, Federal-style house, the former Lamb Tavern, built in 1805. On the crossroads of the old routes to Lancaster and Valley Forge, the house and grounds breathe history—only part of which are the gardens that have been growing here for 200 years.

Gardening has been a part of Weaver's life since early childhood, influenced greatly by his Mennonite grandfather and Quaker grandmother, and whose garden overflowed with a bounty of fresh herbs and vegetables all season.

His grandmother was an excellent cook, so he ate the best. "I saw it come to the table fresh," he recalls.

"Grandfather had pear trees, apple trees, a sour cherry tree, grapes, and wonderful rhubarb and strawberries," Weaver explains.

"Rhubarb-strawberry pie was one of grandmother's specialties. She always baked two—one for herself

and the other for the (extended) family. And homemade ice cream. We always made ice cream in an old crank-turned maker from whatever fruits were in season. Each month seemed to have its own flavor and color."

After his grandparents died, Weaver salvaged seeds that had been squirreled away in baby food jars in the bottom of his grandmother's freezer. Later, he added to them with varieties from an elderly Quaker cousin, a dedicated seed saver. Suddenly, he was caretaker of an extraordinary collection of heritage vegetables and herbs that became the foundation for his organic kitchen garden.



Weaver prefers heirlooms for their taste.

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books—including *Heirloom Vegetable Garder* Holt & Co., 1997)—while he also teaches of at Drexel University and serves as a contritor at *Gourmet* magazine. ("They hire me to writers honest," he explains.)

Cooking goes hand-in-glove with his lo loom seeds because Weaver says heirloom are unsurpassed for taste, canning, or win This makes them ideal for the home garden rarely show up in commercial catalogs or su because heirloom varieties may not ship w the perfect "look" of mass-market vegetable grown only for taste, or perhaps because the ly canned, or store well for winter.

Unlike hybrids, the heirlooms also rep from seed, meaning that seeds from one of produce the same variety again. And, in tomatoes, the variety is endless. Fruits go leafful names as Russian Black, Roman Cancelland, Riesentraube, and Tommy Toe—and every color from dark purple to shades of worange, yellow, and even red.

These and countless other varieties ha handed down by families through untold in this country and elsewhere. Weaver g Nubian Peppers, one of his grandfather's fav its near-black leaves and violet flowers, whi



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Weaver's two acres of garden, the best plants are saved for their seeds. The rest are saved for dinner.

the island of Jamaica. The Aztec Indians, he says, a similar pepper to spice their chocolate drink. The assumption of the person who bred in, such as Jimmy Nardello's Sweet Pepper, aght to America from Italy in 1887 by Guiseppe dello. Others take names from physical charactics, such as the Queensland Blue squash and his Ball lettuce, known for small, tight rosettes ght-green leaves that 17th-century cooks pickin brine, he says. The Garnet Chili Potato, first with in Utica, N.Y., in 1853, now has the same y, flavorful taste of a century ago.

pring is a busy time for Weaver, as hundreds of s are planted in his gardens, or transplanted as lings from his greenhouse.

April 15 to June 15 is my planting season, so madness until everything is in the ground," he

says. "After that, I can glide into summer planting second crops."

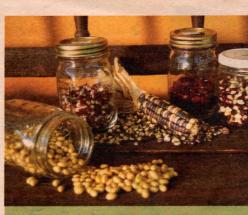
When one crop ripens to harvest, he plants another—30 varieties of tomatoes and peppers in any one year, plus the corn, cucumbers, beans, and so on, with his own labor and that of two part-time helpers.

"I do it for the love," he explains. "Well, actually, it's more like madness."

Weaver doesn't sell the produce he raises, but keeps the best vegetables of any variety to save for seeds and eats what's left.

"I grow organically because I don't need chemical fertilizers," he explains. "My grandfather was that way. I use compost and fish emulsion. Organic produce is more robust, and I have no real problem with pests or diseases."

Seeds for the 3,000 vegetable, herb, and flower varieties Weaver saves and plants in his gardens



## **Heirloom Sources**

Many mail-order seed catalogs off heirloom seeds, and one of the riche sources is The Seed Savers Exchange (SSE)-a nonprofit organization whose 8,000 mer bers grow and distribute heirloom vegetable fruit, and grain seeds. Some 20,000 rare veetable varieties are maintained at SSE's Heitage Farm in Decorah, lowa. For information on the exchange, or to get its annual seed calog, write to the SSE at 3076 North Win Road, Decorah, IA 52101; call (319)382-599 or visit its website at www.seedsavers.org.

To find other sources, search the Internusing the key words, "heirloom seed." Comply drop by your local garden supply ceter and pick up your seeds there. Whatever varieties you choose, the pleasure lies growing them yourself.

make up what he calls the Roughwood Seed C tion (in reference to his home's name in the 1 These he shares with other gardeners throug nonprofit Seed Savers Exchange Yearbook, includes listings of some 12,000 plants from ber growers all over the country (see sidebar).

To Weaver, this stock of seed represents he national treasure and a personal one, in knowing to can eat the exact same beans, tomatoes, pepper melons that his grandparents ate, and their aparents before them, in a priceless chain of flav variety that only the backyard gardener can know the second of the secon

Cynthia Elyce Rubin is a folk-art historian and wn New York City.