

# American Profile

## The Seed Saver

Preserving our forefathers' garden seeds

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# The Seed Saver

Saving  
the seeds of  
our forefathers

by CYNTHIA ELYCE RUBIN Photos by Ade

**When Tuscurora Indians need centuries-old corn varieties for ceremonial events, they go to William Woy 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.

From this, Weaver developed his present-day garden for great food and vegetables. His organic garden covers two acres, including a 60-foot greenhouse. He not only grows a few varieties of vegetables and herbs every year (but always the best seeds), but he also "breeds" plants such as the Tuscurora to re-create varieties that were before America was founded.

Weaver has written

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

Cooking goes hand-in-glove with his love of heirloom seeds because Weaver says heirloom varieties are unsurpassed for taste, canning, or winter storage. This makes them ideal for the home gardener, as they rarely show up in commercial catalogs or supermarkets because heirloom varieties may not ship with the perfect "look" of mass-market vegetables, or perhaps because they are grown only for taste, or perhaps because they are rarely canned, or store well for winter.

Unlike hybrids, the heirlooms also reproduce from seed, meaning that seeds from one variety will produce the same variety again. And, in the case of tomatoes, the variety is endless. Fruits go by colorful names as Russian Black, Roman Candy, Pink, Riesentraube, and Tommy Toe—and come in every color from dark purple to shades of white, orange, yellow, and even red.

These and countless other varieties have been handed down by families through untold generations in this country and elsewhere. Weaver grows Nubian Peppers, one of his grandfather's favorites, for its near-black leaves and violet flowers, which

Seed-starting begins in Weaver's greenhouse.







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

on the island of Jamaica. The Aztec Indians, he says, used a similar pepper to spice their chocolate drink. Some plants were named for the person who bred them, such as Jimmy Nardello's Sweet Pepper, brought to America from Italy in 1887 by Guiseppe Nardello. Others take names from physical characteristics, such as the Queensland Blue squash and his Ball lettuce, known for small, tight rosettes of light-green leaves that 17th-century cooks pickled in brine, he says. The Garnet Chili Potato, first grown in Utica, N.Y., in 1853, now has the same fiery, flavorful taste of a century ago. Spring is a busy time for Weaver, as hundreds of seeds are planted in his gardens, or transplanted as seedlings from his greenhouse. "From April 15 to June 15 is my planting season, so it's a little bit of 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 offer heirloom seeds, and one of the richest sources is The Seed Savers Exchange (SSE)—a nonprofit organization whose 8,000 members grow and distribute heirloom vegetable, fruit, and grain seeds. Some 20,000 rare vegetable varieties are maintained at SSE's Heirloom Heritage Farm in Decorah, Iowa. For information on the exchange, or to get its annual seed catalog, write to the SSE at 3076 North Winthrop Road, Decorah, IA 52101; call (319)382-5999 or visit its website at [www.seedsavers.org](http://www.seedsavers.org).

To find other sources, search the Internet using the key words, "heirloom seed." You can simply drop by your local garden supply center and pick up your seeds there. Whatever varieties you choose, the pleasure lies in growing them yourself.

make up what he calls the Roughwood Seed Collection (in reference to his home's name in the 1800s). These he shares with other gardeners through a nonprofit *Seed Savers Exchange Yearbook*, which includes listings of some 12,000 plants from 100 member growers all over the country (see sidebar).

To Weaver, this stock of seed represents both a national treasure and a personal one, in knowing that he can eat the exact same beans, tomatoes, peppers, and melons that his grandparents ate, and their grandparents before them, in a priceless chain of flavor and variety that only the backyard gardener can know.

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