

Heirlooms vs. Hybrids

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A century ago, just about every farmer in this country saved seed from their crops to replant the following year. Heirloom, or Heritage, seeds refer to any type of seed that has been grown for a number of years and passed down by a family or group that has preserved them.

Some say to be considered an heirloom, the seed must be 100 years old, while others say it must have originated before widespread plant hybridization, which started after World War II. Typically, to qualify as an heirloom, the variety must be at least 40 years old.

Heirloom seeds are varieties created by open pollination. This means the plants are pollinated by birds, insects, wind, or other natural means. Any changes to the seeds have happened naturally over time.

Hybrids, on the other hand, are created through cross-pollination of two different varieties of a plant, then developed and selected for high yield, uniform appearance and size, and durability to withstand travelling long distances. But breeding for consistency can make plants more susceptible to various diseases and pests. In addition, hybrid seeds will not produce similar plants when saved from year to year whereas heirloom seeds keep their genetic traits for future use.

Since heirloom seeds have evolved in their specific regions over generations, they adapt easily to climate and soil variations in those regions, unlike hybrid plants. Therefore, heirloom seeds may be better able to thrive in times of draught, disease and pestilence, conditions that might otherwise knock newer varieties out.

You can buy heirloom seeds from seed companies, but the best way to get them is locally through seed exchanges. That way, the variety has become well-suited to your area, over years and years of growing seasons. Typically, heirlooms have superior taste, quality, and hardiness.

Once you find the heirloom varieties that you love, saving your own seeds is the best way to ensure that they quickly adapt to your soil and growing conditions over your lifetime.

Most vegetable seeds remain viable for three to five years when stored properly. For best results, place thoroughly dry seeds in a tightly closed glass jar and keep the jar in a cool dry location. Adding silica gel packets to the jar will help keep them dry as well. Store the seeds in the refrigerator to further increase their life expectancy. To test for germination, sprout seeds between moist paper towels. If germination is low, either discard the seeds or plant extra to achieve the desirable number of plants.

Heirloom seeds offer many advantages: nourishment, flavor, biodiversity and climate resiliency. For many gardeners, saving an heirloom cultivar is a connection to their heritage.