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March 10, 2010

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

HEIRLOOM VEGETABLE VARIETIES

Now that the sun has us thinking of spring, and it is time to choose which seeds to plant, why not try some heirloom vegetables in your garden this year? An heirloom variety can be the original species of a plant or perhaps something that your ancestors may have planted: old garden crops that have been selected over the years for desirable traits. (*Selected* is different than *hybridized*. Hybrid vegetables will be dealt with in a future article.)

What are some advantages to growing heirloom varieties? Many have superior taste and nutrition, as they have not been bred, as many hybrids are, for qualities desired in commercial production, such as uniformity and good looks. Some are better suited for home production because they produce throughout the growing season, not all at once. Most are open-pollinated, allowing you to save your own seeds from year to year with certain precautions, which cannot be done with hybrid varieties. Seed saving and seed starting of these varieties can also help to preserve genetic diversity, and growing your own allows you to try “new” old-fashioned tastes, most of which are not readily available in nurseries.

Some types to try are Mary Washington asparagus, Kentucky Wonder beans (all types), Bull’s Blood or Chioggia beets, Calabrese broccoli, Danish Ball Head cabbage, Nantes carrot, Golden Bantam sweet corn, Lincoln peas, Blue Hubbard winter squash, Cherokee Purple tomatoes, Purple Top White Globe turnips, and so many more! It is an adventure just to discover—or rediscover—all manner of tasty vegetables (and fruits). Many seed catalogs now carry heirloom or heritage varieties. Some of my favorites are *Johnny’s Selected Seeds*, *Pinetree Garden Seeds*, *Territorial Seeds*, and *Abundant Life Seeds*. Books like William Woys Weaver’s *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening* are also valuable resources. Don’t forget to talk to long-time gardeners about what they or their parents and grandparents have grown: a great way to discover old treasures.

Because of the challenges of our climate here in North Idaho, choose varieties with the least days
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to maturity, which are cold hardy. (For more varieties and details on growing vegetables in our area, check out the “Short-Season, High-Altitude Gardening” series of bulletins available from the UI Extension.) It is not impossible to find heirloom vegetables that fit the bill for the microclimates here, although many can take longer to mature, and may be susceptible to certain diseases. With a little research and extra care, and by using season extenders, and good garden hygiene and maintenance, you can reap a diverse, flavorful, and bountiful harvest.

Kit Cooley has been a University of Idaho Master Gardener in Bonner County since 2008.

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