
TO MARKET, TO MARKET

GROWING HEIRLOOM VEGETABLES

BY CHRISTINA CAMPBELL



Heirloom vegetables are horticultural and culinary treasures – striking to behold and intensely flavourful. The definition of an heirloom vegetable varies depending on what you read and to whom you are talking. Certain elements come up consistently: They are vegetable varieties that have been grown for many years without hybridization, are not readily available commercially, have historical or social significance, and are especially flavourful or eye-catching.

Protecting heirloom vegetable varieties ensures the genetic diversity of plants. Since seeds have a limited shelf life, plants need to be grown and new seeds collected in order to preserve the varieties for the future. Alex Caron is a biologist and heirloom potato enthusiast in Snowball, Ontario, a small town just north of Toronto. He preserves over two hundred varieties of heirloom potatoes. For Alex, a potato does not require commercially attractive features to be worth growing, since its genetic material is valuable in and of itself for the future of our food crops' gene pool.

Heirloom vegetables are the ultimate local food. They are not usually available in supermarkets, since they are grown for flavour and sensual appeal, rather than for long-distance shipping and shelf life. They are usually grown lovingly in smaller gardens, where they are tended by hand. And you'd be hard pressed to find an heirloom vegetable that had not been grown organically.

Unless you're growing your own, heirloom varieties of vegetables are found almost exclusively at farm stands and farmers' markets. One of the most exciting ways to obtain heirloom vegetables is to grow your own. Many of the soft-skinned varieties of tomatoes are best right off the vine, and the less handling of them, the better. The unusual forms that heirloom vegetables can take add an exotic feel to the garden and will mystify your neighbours. It is extremely rewarding to know exactly how one's food is produced, confident that what you are eating is chemical-free and responsibly grown.

The easiest way to grow vegetables on small city plots is in containers. Choose large containers in order to minimize watering frequency and maximize the space for your plants' roots. Plastic and fibreglass containers provide ease of handling and watering,

Photograph: Carole Topalian

since they inhibit water evaporation and are lightweight.

Fill your containers with a soilless mix, as you would for other container-grown plants, and place them in the sunniest location you have. Mulching will stabilize water evaporation, which your plants will appreciate. Feel free to gently fertilize your plants with organic fertilizers, although it is not necessary. Water thoroughly when the top 1½ to 2 inches of soil is dry. Vining plants, such as tomatoes, can be given a tidy, formal appearance using a garden obelisk, which is a four-sided form of trellising. The vines grow through the obelisk and require no further support. If your enthusiasm for growing demands more space, move to the lawn or adopt a plot at an allotment garden in one of the many locations throughout the city.

Beginning gardeners can purchase young heirloom vegetable plants in the springtime at farmers' markets. Urban Harvest is a Toronto company that is a wonderful source for ecologically diverse seeds and plants, which owner Colette Murphy sells at Dufferin Grove Organic Market and elsewhere. Seeds of Diversity, a Canadian charitable organization devoted to saving and testing heirloom seed, is a rich

Colette Murphy of Urban Harvest, at Dufferin Grove Organic Market

resource, as is Seedy Saturday, an annual organic and heirloom seed exchange and gardening fair that was held recently in Toronto.

For the slightly adventurous gardener, the world of heirloom vegetable seeds is a vast and exciting one. Heirloom vegetables are "open-pollinated," meaning that wind, insects or animals pollinate them. Most seeds will grow true to their parents, but occasionally a "surprise" offspring that differs from its parents may come into being



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(hurray for genetic diversity!). Once grown, plants supply the seed for subsequent years.

Before you start growing your own, begin by asking the many people in the heirloom vegetable community what their favourites are, and you'll soon find that there are certain varieties you cannot be without. Buy them or grow them, but just don't miss out on them. Heirloom vegetables are a feast for the senses and a boon for the planet and the local community. □

Christina Campbell is a certified horticulturist (University of Guelph, 2001) and formerly sole proprietor of Living Arts, a fine-gardening company. She has worked and studied at the New England Wildflower Society, gardened in Spadina House's historical gardens, and taught with Habitat for Humanity. Christina specializes in native plant ecology and aesthetic attributes, researching plants for utility and beauty, soil science and pruning techniques.

RESOURCES

Urban Harvest: www.uharvest.ca
 Seeds of Diversity: www.seeds.ca
 Seedy Saturday www.tcgn.ca

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