

HEIRLOOM



Counterculture



The Origins of Heritage Foods Revivals 1980-1985

BY GARY PAUL NABHAN

A third of a century ago, an unprecedented grassroots movement emerged from American soil.

It is a movement that is still alive, one for which *Heirloom Gardener* magazine has become the freshest and mostly-widely read source of information and inspiration.

It may well be worth your while to reflect on the origins of the social change movement to which you belong, for it is a wellspring of food diversity, and as such, an important counter-current to modern agriculture.

OF COURSE,

humans have been saving and exchanging seeds for ten millennia, but a century ago, Americans fell under the spell of a collective amnesia: they began to allow national and international seed catalogs to provide them with the bulk of the seeds they grew, and the vast majority of grafted saplings of the fruit and nut trees they transplanted to their home orchards. While the D. Landreth Seed Company—the oldest in the U.S.—began in 1784, and the Stark Brothers began distributing grafted fruit trees as early as 1816, rural families regarded these sources of plant materials as supplemental to those which they conserved in the home nursery, their root cellar, and their seed caches.

Other commercial sources of food plant diversity were initially welcomed by farmers and gardeners across the United States, but the American populace gradually lost the skills of saving seeds and grafting fruit trees gathered from their

own landscapes. By around the time of the first Earth Day and the Southern Corn Blight in 1970, the consolidation of the seed industry began to accelerate.

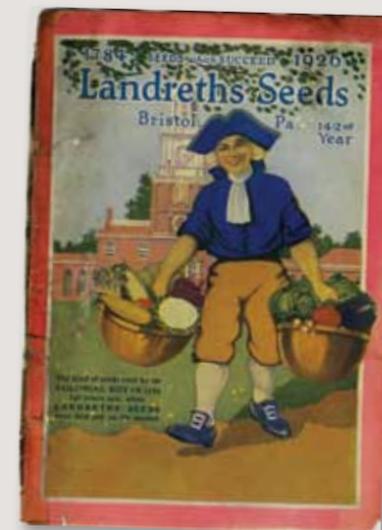
Within the next decade, hundreds of small regional and local seed suppliers had been bought out and merged into large multi-nationals. Most of their local-adapted “heirloom” vegetable, fruit and grain varieties were dropped from the catalogs after these mergers and hostile take-overs occurred. When the National Academy of Sciences concluded that the corn blight of the 1970s was due to the over-dependence on monoculture, plant scientists, and farmers conceded that the genetic base of American agriculture had become dangerously narrowed. One of the first to sound the alarm beyond the scientific community was the crop genetic conservationist, Garrison Wilkes:

“Given the needs of the future, genetic resources can be considered one of society’s most valuable raw materials.

...But genetic erosion [is now occurring with] the loss of landraces and heritage crops—biotypes—that have been in families for a long time.”

While there were many heirloom seed collectors scattered across the United States before Garrison Wilkes blew his whistle—from bean collector John Withee in New England to Oscar H. and George Will in the Northern Plains and Alan Kapuler of Peace Seeds in the Pacific Northwest—a growing number of conservation-oriented activists began to take up this issue in the late 1970s.

John Carr of the short-lived American Seed Conservancy was motivated by the fact that three-quarters of the crop strains grown in the New World at the time of Columbus have since become extinct. Cary Fowler of the National Sharecropper’s Fund discovered that in less than a century, 86 percent of the heirloom apple varieties recorded by W.H. Ragan in 1905 had become extinct. Kent Whealy, who



SOME OF THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST SEED COMPANIES include D. Landreth, Stark Brothers, and the Oscar H. Will Co.

Photo: Seed Savers Exchange

Photo: Barbara Melera/Landreth

TODAY'S annual National Heirloom Expo, organized by Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, is the offspring of the 1985 National Seed Conference.



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—KIT ANDERSON

founded what was initially called the True Seed Exchange, was preoccupied with impending collapse of Western capitalistic societies, and the need of back-to-the-landers to keep seed diversity on their homesteads if they were to survive economic or military holocausts.

In 1981, Cynthia Anson, Mahina Drees, and I organized the first national workshop on seed saving, called Seed Banks Serving People. Through the Meals for Millions/Freedom from Hunger Foundation, we had already jumpstarted a regional project called the Southwest Traditional Crop Conservancy Garden and Seed Bank, the precursor of Native Seeds/SEARCH.

As a 29-year-old seed collector and ethnobotanist, I somehow had the audacity and naiveté to invite prominent government and corporate seed scientists I had recently met to come to Tucson to discuss the emergence of community seed banking and grassroots seed exchanges with two dozen youthful activists. Although the participants were of many political and ideological persuasions, professional backgrounds and ethnicities, they all loved

the miracle of seeds, and valued diversity.

To our surprise, elders such as 78-year-old retired plant explorer Howard Scott Gentry got along famously with seed collectors and gardeners a third his age! In a sense, this meeting was the passing of the baton, as if the seed guard was changing from one generation to the next. Young idealists such as Forest Roth-Shomer of Abundant Life Seed Foundation, Kent Whealy of the Seed Savers Exchange and Craig Dremann of Redwood City Seed Company were blessed and encouraged by the women and men who had dominated the seed-saving professions since World War II.

Among those who gathered at Tucson Botanical Garden for the Seed Banks Serving People workshop was Kit Anderson, a dynamic young journalist who covered the seed beat for *Gardens for All*, the news magazine of the National Gardening Association. Kit took the next step in galvanizing a national heirloom seed movement, by convincing the NGA and Missouri Botanical Garden to host the first-ever National Seed Conference in St. Louis during October of 1985. It was an event that was without a

doubt the symbolic precursor of today's National Heirloom Exposition (organized by Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds) in Santa Rosa, California.

Like Cary Fowler and me, Kit had already testified in Congress against the patenting of garden seeds, but at the same time had met many conventional plant breeders and government seed curators in their grow-out fields all cross the country. As Kit recently recalled, she was just as concerned about the consolidation in the seed industry as other activists were at the time, but "I just couldn't believe that the plant breeders themselves—the men and women who I had met in the field—were bad. I thought that if we could get all these people together in a beautiful place with good food and a safe setting, they would get past their official identities and jargon and listen enough to respect one another."

And so, Kit brought together for the first time the cultural creatives who had recently incorporated a number of for-profit and non-profit operations to save their region's heirloom seeds. They in-



CAPTION: Caption here...

(John Withee)

Photo: Seed Savers Exchange

cluded Rob Johnston, who had recently moved his Johnny Appleseed from Massachusetts to become Johnny's Selected Seeds in Albion, Maine. Rosalind Creasy, photographer and later author of *The Edible Heirloom Garden* appeared, as did Jeff McCormick, founder of Southern Exposure Seed Exchange.

There were many more dynamic characters in the mix, and yet none of these youthful pioneers had ever met in person with their allies from other regions. As Bill McDorman, current Director of Native Seeds/SEARCH recalls, "I think we have to remember the conference happened before the Internet. It was our social network. Period. Because of it, I learned just how much I shared with others around the country. I became part of a network

that is still important to me, emotionally and professionally."

At the same time, the scholarly and professional elders of seed trade, seed science and seed conservation came out in force: Bill Brown, noted corn historian and the President of Pioneer Hi-Bred Seeds; Eric Roos, Seed Storage Physiologist at the National Seed Storage Laboratory; Alan Stoner, Director of the National Plant Germplasm System of the USDA; and Garrison Wilkes from the University of Massachusetts.

As the dialogue ensued, one clear theme emerged from the conservation: Heirloom seeds were no longer being considered *raw materials* useful only to plant breeders. The younger generation were attracted to heirloom seeds for other reasons: they tasted great, they were nutritious and colorful, and some were adapted to special growing conditions and climates.

All of a sudden, a movement was born. The conference was perhaps the first in the country to feature for its banquet and luncheon a wide array of nearly forgotten but delectably-tasting and textured heirloom tomatoes, amaranths, squashes and tepary beans on the menu. Whoever had doubts during the conference sessions that such seedstocks could make a comeback in America was now convinced by the gorgeous colors, fragrances and

flavors of the feast.

Late that day, all matter of seed savers, farmers and scientists were seen dancing in a chain across the stage of the botanical garden's theatre, gifting ancient seeds to one another and singing new songs about them. Dr. Garrison Wilkes, the Paul Revere of the Heirloom Seed Movement, quietly smiled and whispered to Kit, "In all my life, I have never enjoyed a conference as much as this one."

From that point on in American discourse, seeds could no longer be considered as mere bundles of genes, museum pieces or raw materials known by the ungodly technical term, *germplasm*. Once again, they were seen and heard as living stories of the sacred journeys taken together by plants and people from one reach of the world to another. They were celebrated—as they are today in the pages of this magazine—as the highest artistic expression of our cultural collaborations with the natural world. They are "sacred art we can eat;" they will most surely live on beyond us. 🌱

GARY PAUL NABHAN's next book about adapting farms and gardens to climate change, *Growing Food in a Hot, Dry Land*, will be released by Chelsea Green Publishing this June. This spring he celebrates the 30th anniversary of Native Seeds/SEARCH, which he co-founded.



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