Fill your garden with heirloom seeds rich in - Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA) - February 21, 2021 - page D4
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It was a summer day in the late '60s, and William Woys Weaver was on a mission to clean out his grandmother's "Volkswagen-sized" chest freezer. Home from college, Weaver went down to the cellar, lifted the freezer's heavy lid, and looked inside. What he discovered would go on to change his life forever. There, nestled beneath 20-year-old bags of peaches, were hundreds of hidden vegetable seeds.

"The entire bottom was covered with these little baby food jars, all neatly labeled," recalls Weaver. "The joke is that they were probably my baby food jars."

The seeds belonged to Weaver's grandfather, who initially started gardening to feed his family during the Great Depression. It snowballed into a much larger passion that led him to collect rare heirlooms from across the region, until he passed away in 1956.

Curious to see if they'd grow, Weaver immediately got to work sowing his grandfather's seeds into the ground. And as soon as he began tasting their fruit, he never looked back. Fast forward roughly 50 years, and today, Weaver, 74, an author, local food historian, and curator of Roughwood Seed Collection, has added thousands of regional heirlooms to the collection. He's dedicated his life to sharing the distinct flavors and the stories behind each.

"I remember when I grew my first Brandywine [tomato], and I thought, 'Oh my god, you can't find this at the store,' " says Weaver. "We have this incredibly rich heritage right in our backyard, and when you grow and share these heirlooms, everyone's blown away. That's what it's really all about."

Once home to some of the largest seed companies in the world, the Philadelphia area holds centuries of seed history to explore. Many flavorful varieties of the past still exist today, the late-1800s Brandywine and beyond. Sowing a few in your own garden can create a fun way to diversify your harvest while learning more about where you live.

Unfortunately, there's no one-stop shop or website to find seeds connected to local history. But plenty of resources exist, Roughwood Seed Collection just one among them. Here's a guide on where to find seeds and a look at how they connect with Philly's history.

What are heirloom plants?

If you're looking to sow a garden rich in history, a good place to start is with heirlooms. Heirlooms are plants whose seeds have been passed down from generation to generation, evolved by natural or human selection over time. Most people consider heirlooms to be at least 50 years old, although the exact number is subject to debate.All heirlooms are open-pollinated, which means unlike hybrid plants, seeds collected from one year will produce plants with similar characteristics the next year. "That's part of the appeal — you can continue these things and they become part of your family's tradition," says Weaver. "People are proud to grow Grandma's squash."

A brief history of vegetable seeds in Philadelphia

Philly's seed stories begin with the Lenni-Lenape Indians, the first-known settlers of what's now Philadelphia. They cultivated lands along the Delaware River in eastern Pennsylvania, as well as those across New Jersey and southeastern New York. Staple crops consisted of beans, squash, and corn, like the beautiful blue Sehsapsing Flint Corn.

"They were pushed out by the 1770s and are now out in Oklahoma," says Weaver. "The government moved them more than 60 times, and every time they had to move, they lost something. They went from 19 varieties of corn in Pennsylvania to two." When European settlers took over the area, most Lenape were force to move west. But there were also the area's newly settled Quakers, who worked with the remaining Lenape in the 1800s to try to protect their rights and preserved many of their crops, like the Blue Shackamaxon Pole Bean

and Summer Crookneck Squash.

The Quakers h[eld a deep curiosity for plants. John Bartram, Philly's most distinguished Quaker farmer, traveled all across eastern North America to gather seeds, introducing hundreds of new native plants into cultivation. His seed collection included numerous tree, shrub, and flower varieties, but he was interested in vegetables and herbs, too. Bartram's Garden, founded in 1728, is the country's oldest surviving botanic garden. Today, the National Historic Landmark carries on a vegetable garden primarily dedicated to seed varieties grown pre-1830s, like Nanticoke Squash and Purple Kingsessing Bean.

In the late 18th and 19th centuries, the area's first official seed producers emerged, like D. Landreth Seed Company (founded in 1784), the oldest operating American seed company, and Burpee (founded in 1876), once the largest seed company in the world and still a household name.

"You had all these immigrant farmers who would carry seeds with them from Europe or have seeds sent, but plants obey the sun, which means a carrot from Northern Germany wasn't going to do well here," says George Ball, Burpee owner and executive chairman. "Seeds were bad, germination was low, and so Mr. Burpee met the challenge by adapting European seed stocks to American growing conditions."

W. Atlee Burpee and other seedsmen capitalized on the rich, sandy soils surrounding the region's rivers, filling open lands with plants and breeding them for our climate, soil, and pests. "By the 1820s, Philadelphia was hands down the center of seed production," says Weaver. "If you look at Thomas Jefferson's garden books, where is he buying seeds? Philadelphia."

Philadelphia's lead lasted into the 1930s, with seedsmen developing many varieties that became nationally popular.

Where to find Philadelphia-area heirlooms

To find local heirlooms, start by looking at some of the major historical players who remain in the region:

Bartram's Gardens sells seeds in its gift shop, like the Plait de Haiti Tomato, brought here in 1793 by Creole refugees fleeing the Haitian slave uprising, and the Willings Barbados Pepper, a spicy pepper used in dishes like Philadelphia pepper pot soup, given to Bartram by Charles Willing. "Willing was twice the mayor of Philadelphia and a global capitalist who traded slaves and sugar," says Bartram's Garden lead gardener Mandy Katz. "The wild Barbados plant came into the U.S. through the awful slave trade and became incorporated into Philly food and also the drawing room of the upper class as an ornamental plant."

Burpee also offers a variety of seeds that date back to the company's earlier days, although you'll have to read through written seed descriptions to find them. If buying online, type "heirloom" into Burpee's search bar to narrow down the options. This will generate a list scattered with local options, like Black Beauty eggplant, Golden Bantam sweet corn, Iceberg lettuce, and Fordhook lima bean, 19thand early-20th-century Burpee heirlooms, says Ball. You'll also find the Brandywine, a pinkish, beef steak tomato named after Chester County's Brandywine Creek and prized by many gardeners. "There's no documentation and everyone argues about it, but we believe Burpee was the first to introduce Brandywine on any kind of large scale," says Ball.

Other outlets to check out include Weaver's Roughwood Seed Collection. While not all of its seeds are locally rooted, the core of the collection remains tied to the area. It includes a few varieties, like the Fish Pepper, that Weaver's grandfather got from friend and West Chester folk artist Horace Pippin. If you have questions about what's local, you can email Roughwood at info@roughwoodtable.org .

One of the easiest places to search for local heirlooms is Truelove Seeds, a company focused on culturally important and sus tainably raised vegetable, herb, and flower seeds. Truelove works with close to 50 farmers nationwide who grow their ancestral seeds for its catalog . And they've got an entire online collection dedicated to Philly heirlooms, each listed with historical background.

Truelove also offers heirlooms whose origins are linked to many of the immigrant communities that now shape Philadelphia. They've developed relationships with farms like Novick Urban Farm, which works closely with South Philadelphia's Burmese and Bhutanese refugee communities, and Sankofa Community Farm, a production and education farm rooted in the African diaspora experience of Southwest Philadelphians.

“We can tell the history of our city but I’m also really interested in the history of the people that live here,” says Owen Taylor, owner of Truelove Seeds. “There are so many people carrying these histories from around the world that are now becoming the tastes of Philadelphia.”

Taylor also runs Philadelphia Seed Exchange, which pre-pandemic, served as another source for finding heirlooms. The group attracts all sorts of seed savers to triannual seed swaps, typically held at the Free Library of Philadelphia. Taylor plans to restart meet ups as soon as the pandemic climate allows. In the meantime, all are invited to join the Facebook group.

Once you know what you’re looking for, you can find local seeds through numerous seed suppliers. And you can lighten your research load by navigating toward those that focus on heirlooms, especially regional suppliers, which also include Baker Creek and Happy Cat. Most welcome you to reach out with questions. The gardening community is a friendly one, and within it is one of the best places to learn.

“So much about food history is lost, so it does take a concerted effort to build it back into our culture,” says Katz. “There’s no way to zap a button on the internet to know all of this stuff. It’s a way of life — you have to dive into the community of stories that seeds carry.”

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