

Seed Time

The Agricultural Legacy of Heirloom Seeds

By Elizabeth Tatum Barnes

Last Thanksgiving, I hurried into my kitchen early in the morning to start my famous “squash bake” my signature dish I tote to various family holiday functions. I halved two gigantic butternut squash and scooped the seeds from the middle, arranging them on a piece of newspaper to dry. Not only was I baking a dish that could soften the hearts of even the toughest in-laws, I was dabbling in the centuries-old process of seed-saving.

Seed savers and heirloom preservation groups seek to preserve the vanishing heritage of our fruits and vegetables. In the 1800s, over 7000 varieties of apples were grown in the U.S.; in the past, more than 5000 types of potatoes were grown. Today, only four kinds of potatoes are commonly grown. Ninety-seven percent of vegetable varieties grown at the beginning of the 20th century are now extinct.

It is always poignant to consider extinction of any species. But what does this mean for us, besides dwindling consumer choice? The consequences involve not only the loss of our agricultural legacy, but also the origins of our food supply, the rise of unlabeled genetically modified foods, and the use of dangerous herbicides and pesticides.

Uniformity in the food supply, such as the consolidation of the potatoes, causes vulnerability to disease and pests. The Irish potato famine of the 1840s was caused by a blight of one variety of potato, the lumpers. The lumpers, all genetically identical, were ruined by the blight. If more types of potatoes been grown, the blight would have dealt a lighter blow to the

Irish people instead of killing one in eight.

Diversity for its own sake is not the only advantage of planting heirloom seed. Chemical companies such as Monsanto, creator of RoundUp-Ready® varieties, promote genetically-modified “self-terminating” or “suicide” seeds which are developed to be sterile, with seeds which cannot be saved for future planting. In developing countries, where the price of genetically modified U.S. seed frequently undercuts the price of native seed, self-terminating technology can force poor farmers in Asia and South America to purchase new seed each year, leading to a cycle of poverty and dependence upon chemical sprays like RoundUp. These corporations are working to promote “traitor technology,” or seed that will not germinate without being sprayed with insecticides or herbicides sold by the same corporation. In the United States, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) like RoundUp Ready tomatoes can be difficult to identify, since no special labeling identifying GMO food products is required.

Sound depressing? Luckily, several alternatives exist to the large-scale mass-production model of farming.

Many people concerned about diversity and GMOs take matters into their own hands and try growing some of their own produce. Not all of us have the time or space to undertake farming projects big enough to feed our families, but whether it's a window box or a new way of planting your existing garden, heirlooms can transform your approach to food. Growing heirlooms not only yields unique, tasty pro-

duce, but it also allows you to control your growing methods—if you use pesticides or fertilizers, you know exactly what they are and control the applications. Unlike hybrid seed, properly preserved heirloom seeds should produce the same plant year after year.

Supporting the heirloom seed movement can help undermine the rise of self-terminating technology, and help preserve the dwindling number of plant varieties.

Spring planting season is here and you can still get organic or heirloom seed in time to plant this year. Numerous heirloom seed companies that offer full-color catalogs, websites, or both. **The Seed Savers Exchange** (www.seedsavers.org) is a nonprofit organization committed to the conservation and promotion of heirloom plants. The 2008 Exchange catalog offers 647 total varieties, 181 of which are certified organic—family heirlooms preserved by its members, commercial varieties discontinued from mainstream commercial catalogs, and traditional varieties from all over the globe. **Johnny's Selected Seeds** (johnnyseeds.com), founded in 1973 offers more than 230 organic varieties and environmentally-friendly gardening products, and employs the only two Registered Seed Technologists in New England to ensure seed quality. **Heirloom Seeds** (www.heirloom-seeds.com) promises non-hybrid, non-genetically engineered varieties. **High Mowing Organic Seeds** (www.highmowingseeds.com) are specially bred to do well under organic growing conditions and are GMO-free. ■

Upcoming community events: “Gardening for Victory: A Home Gardener’s History.” Lexington Public Library, Beaumont Branch, April 17 at 7pm. Central Library, April 19 at 10am and Northside Branch at 2pm. Take a look at the history of America’s victory garden program and take home an organic heirloom tomato plant for your own garden. Reservations required; call 859.231.5570.

Green in Spirit

By Father Joe Muench

As the Pope visits the U.S. this week (and the Vatican has highlighted seven deadly sins against the environment), Father Joe provides one local priest’s Earth Day reflections.

GREEN, GREEN, GREEN. What does a priest know about the green issue? Well, I am used to that kind of question. Many folks think priests live in a bubble. I have been told, “Get a real job,” and “How would you know?” Au contraire! We live in the same world, believe me. There are more than two ways to see the world. Each culture has a different take on nature. Within each culture there are those who interpret reality through lenses of many different philosophies, ethics, sciences, moralities, and even—religions or the lack of religion. How you see the world determines how “green” you will be. It determines how your actions will promote all that is “green” as you see the issue.

I was once told of a group of green minded volunteers who cleaned a creek bed. They got separated and one youngster rejoined the group empty-handed. When the leader questioned him as to where the trash he picked up was, imagine the grimace when the boy said, “Oh, I threw it in the creek, like I always do.” What a teachable moment. I really think that we are a lot less “green spirited” than we could be because of our cultural biases. One weakness we have is to avoid dealing with the consequences

of our actions. We just do not think things through to their logical conclusions. For example, there is a lot of crude oil, but the supply is not renewable. It was once presumed that there was an abundant supply. We do not like learning that we were mistaken. I doubt if many people reflect on the “permanent” quality of plastic. You can break it or melt it, but you cannot make it go away. I was recently in a discussion over vinyl siding. Sure vinyl siding is cheaper up front, but, it never goes away. When it needs to be replaced it is off to the landfill. I certainly do not know how it will be handled at the second coming, but, I am rather sure it will be around then. Forget vinyl siding. How about plastic bags at grocery stores, plastic trash bags, Styrofoam plates and cups, or even paper products preserved in plastic trash bags. Sure, I see a need for precaution with the disposal hazardous waste, but, is everything so toxic? We do have to answer to others for how we make use of the world. Few rights are absolute.

Almost every personal right—e.g. right to private property (including its disposal)—is mitigated by the common good and the needs of others. This is just sound logic, ethics and philosophy. We have to answer to each other. Pardon my religious bias...Perhaps we need to balance our infatuation with science or pseudoscience with a spiritual perspective.

One other way our personal rights are more relative than they are absolute is the responsibility we have to the Cause of creation. Misuse of things is a great offense to the Creator. A green attitude

is impossible without context.

Hence, maybe, just maybe the quickest way to green is the way of the soul. The mind is one of the intangible, immeasurable realities we all experience. It is the mind that has to change if we are to make green choices. The mind will let us see and appreciate, beyond our narrow perspectives, our responsibility to respect and promote the common good and—hopefully—to reverence the rights of our creator. Science is very good. Science would be impossible if there were no order in the world. The method of science is an effort to unlock the order of the word both to understand it and to use it to our best advantage. The best use of a correct understanding of the order of the world is to cooperate with it.

All too often we have misused science, not to cooperate with the order of nature, but to escape it. I am reminded of a line attributed to Thomas More in A Man for All Seasons. He and his son-in-law are debating the Law of the Realm. Naively, the son-in-law suggested anarchy. More says, “And you, when you have knocked all the laws flat, when you turn round and find yourself face to face with the devil, then where will you hide?”

When we have knocked flat all the order of creation, then we better pray for an ark and some shade. A fuller and clearer green understanding of the world is impossible without a wider perspective that includes a discussion of the common good and the relative quality of our personal rights.

Peace! ■