

Heirloom Vegetables

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Now that July is here, it is the perfect time to start planning your vegetable garden! The vegetables that are normally grown up north from May through September are typically grown here in central Florida through the fall, winter and spring. Starting plants from seed is a lot of fun and a great thing to grow for the vegetable garden are heirloom vegetables.

Just in case you have never heard of heirloom vegetables they are typically vegetables that have been brought over from other countries and have been grown here in the US for decades. The definition of an heirloom can differ between who you talk to but generally they are any vegetable that have been grown by our grandparents and their ancestors. Therefore, these varieties represent our gardening heritage. Most records of early vegetable varieties start in the first part of this century. Another characteristic of heirloom vegetables is that they are open-pollinated (OP) which means that the seeds can be saved and when planted, will come “true to type” which just means the plants look just like their parents.

The choices of heirloom vegetables still seems quite large when you start to look at all of the seed catalogs out there but, it is much smaller now then in years past. The most common food plants that are available today only represent 3% of those present in 1900 and since the time that Columbus roamed the seas, 75% of native crop varieties in the Western Hemisphere have disappeared. When the commercial hybridization of plants began many people started buying the hybridized seeds instead of the heirloom varieties. A disadvantage of hybridized plants is that their seeds can not be harvested and sown the next year because their seeds do not come “true to type”. That means that every year new seeds must be purchased when growing hybridized plants. Hybridized plants were at first desired because of their ability to grow over a wider area and their cosmetic appearance and marketing convenience. These traits replaced the evolutionary and traditional importance once held for the heirloom vegetables genetic diversity, viability, nutrition and flavor. Every year we are losing more and more heirloom vegetables.

Of all the vegetables, tomatoes are probably the most popular. The large selection of heirloom tomatoes can be divided into groups by their uses such as fresh eating, good paste for making sauces or huge ones to enter in your county fair. Tomatoes can also be divided into groups depending upon their shapes and colors so, as you can imagine, the list is huge when you just look at tomatoes. There are a number of books on heirloom vegetables and some on just tomatoes like Smith and Hawken: 100 Heirloom Tomatoes by Carolyn J. Male. Some heirloom vegetables are known to grow better in certain areas so if you are interested in some names of heirloom tomatoes that have been listed for Florida you can choose from; Marglobe, Livingston Globe, Stone, Ponderosa, June Pink, Earliana, Pritchard’s Scarlet Topper, Pam American and Rutgers. Naturally there are possibly a hundred more heirloom tomatoes that could grow well in your garden but these were listed in past bulletins.

Gardeners who want to help save some of these endangered varieties can check out the book the Seed Savers Exchange has compiled which is an inventory of all non-hybrid vegetable varieties available by mail order in both the United States and Canada. The book is entitled the Garden Seed Inventory (6th edition) by Kent Whealy. Motivated gardeners can then purchase and maintain these varieties that are about to be dropped and then share the seeds with other gardeners.

It doesn't matter whether you're going to grow heirloom or hybridized seeds you still need to plant the crops at the correct time of year for central Florida so you should have a copy of our vegetable gardening guide. In addition, I have a handout on heirloom vegetables that contains websites for further information as well as sources of seeds. If you are interested in receiving these bulletins just give us a call at (321) 633-1702 (Monday through Friday between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.) and give us your address or send me an email.

If you would prefer, you can come to a class that I will be holding at the Palm Bay Library on Thursday, July 14th starting at 10 a.m. I will be talking about heirloom vegetables, flowers and antique or Old World roses. If you are interested in attending that class give us a call at the above number to register so that there are enough handouts for everyone.