

SAVING
SEEDS,
PRESERVING
TASTE

heirloom
seed savers
in appalachia

BILL BEST

Ohio University Press
Athens

Contents

Foreword by Howard L. Sacks	• vii
Dedication	• xv
Preface	• xvii

An Introduction to Heritage and Heirloom Seed Saving	• 1
---	-----

Part 1: Heritage Fruit and Heirloom Seeds

Beans	• 13
Tomatoes	• 75
Apples	• 95
Corn	• 105
Candy Roasters	• 114
Cucumbers	• 116

Part 2: Seed Savers

Seeds, Family, Community, and Traditions	• 123
Keepers and Distributors of the Seeds	• 130
For Further Reading	• 191
Index	• 193

Foreword

Howard L. Sacks

A COLLEAGUE OF mine recently shared an eyebrow-raising story involving her college course “Botany and Botanical Arts.” In an “unknown plant” assignment, students were given different “mystery” seeds that they were challenged to cultivate, observe, and identify. One day my colleague discovered a student in the greenhouse who was at a loss over how much to water the plants; the exasperated student explained that she had never before planted a seed.

How removed we have become from an act so fundamental to human civilization! Planting a seed—horticulture—prompted our early ancestors to abandon a nomadic life of foraging to take up a more sedentary existence. The newfound dependability of the food supply enabled populations to grow. Individuals could accumulate more possessions, because they were no longer required to carry everything with them from one food source to the next. Differences of wealth emerged, and with that, differences of power. Humans grew increasingly territorial, and hostilities became more commonplace as groups sought to protect their crop-land. All this, from the planting of a seed.

Not so long ago, most Americans still planted a few seeds. I grew up in postwar Philadelphia during the first wave of the new American idyll known as suburbia. On my street, partially prefabricated identical homes were perched like so many Monopoly plastic houses on deforested land. Visitors to our place were directed to “the sixth new house on the right.” The joke was that a drunken husband might walk into the wrong house at night.

But my mother had grown up in the mountains of Pennsylvania, where houses had been hand built of brick and stone and wood, and the countryside had not seemed far removed from town life. Yet housewives like her and their businessman or professional husbands could not sign up quickly enough for this spot of perfection bearing the fatuous title of “Westgate Hills” (no gates, no hills, but indeed west of the city). Something, though, pulled at my mother, because from my earliest memory she had always planted a few tomatoes against the foundation of our split-level house so that we could taste something fresh. *Fresh*—the word itself is radical, given the change in the American diet to canned and frozen foods. Peering down from my bedroom window to see my neighbor scratching the dirt in his own makeshift backyard garden, and paying attention to my mother and her fondness for these optimistic young tomato plants, I saw that things could live and grow, in opposition to a profoundly denatured landscape.

Then, as now, we knew no more about the source of the seeds we planted than about the origins of the food we purchased from the supermarket shelves. Both seeds and foods were identifiable to us by their corporate names, whether Burpee, Gerber, or Heinz. It wasn’t always that way, of course. Our collective ignorance can be traced to the mid-twentieth-century revolution in agriculture that transformed a diffuse, regionally based system of growing food to a highly centralized system of commodity production for a global market. By the late 1940s, tractors and combines had largely replaced machinery drawn by mules and horses, enabling farmers to cultivate more land with less reliance on their neighbors at planting and harvest time. In the following decades, chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides were promoted and adopted as the saviors for increased productivity and crop yield—their environmental costs left unquestioned in this campaign directed toward farmers. Most recently, genetic seed modification has enabled new varieties of fruits and vegetables designed specifically for global transport and marketing.

These technological breakthroughs complemented government policy and corporate interests. In the 1970s, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz admonished farmers to “get big or get out,” and low-interest bank loans enabled many farmers to buy more land and new equipment to produce a single commodity for sale on the global market. Agriculture schools at land-grant universities spearheaded research to develop new chemical and biological innovations, often financed by the very companies that would reap the profits as farmers became increasingly reliant on their products. Promises of an ever-expanding global demand for American agricultural commodities fueled agricultural speculation, and for a short time many American farmers did just fine. Tragically, the bubble eventually burst, and the reverberations have been both devastating and long-lasting. In the short term it meant the wholesale loss of farms and the decline of rural communities, and the farm crisis anticipated the recent housing market collapse that severely battered the American economy.

In the late twentieth century, American consumers were invited to understand modern agriculture as an unmitigated good. On television, in magazines, in the school systems, and at the university ag program level, the discourse was nearly exclusively that our food supply was abundant, affordable, and convenient. But a growing number of families have begun to question the wisdom and sustainability of handing over our dinner plates to industrial farming enterprises. People are again asking questions about the sources of their food. For some, the issue is health—childhood diabetes, adolescent eating disorders, heart disease, and other diet-related concerns. Others bring agricultural practice under closer scrutiny over food safety, as *E. coli*, *salmonella*, and *mad cow disease* enter our everyday lexicon. And concern about fossil fuels focuses the lens on the degree to which our food supply depends on oil: gas for the combine, petroleum-based fertilizers, and the cost of long-distance transportation, with their corresponding impact on food prices.

And then there is the matter of taste. Tomato varieties designed for resistance to bruising during cross-country transport and extended shelf life just do not taste very good, particularly when compared with homegrown varieties. Eggs from chickens raised under megafarm confinement conditions often have about as much taste as the cardboard containers in which they are packaged. And while supermarkets contain an astonishing array of products, the apples or greens in those bins actually represent just a few varieties chosen for their consistent, blemish-free appearance. As the song goes, “All made out of ticky tacky, and they all look just the same.” When you take the time to think about it, it is no coincidence that suburbanized uniformity shows up in our food system.

But consider an alternative world, one in which it is not only professionals who dictate the colors and textures on our plates, and in which memory and local culture go into every child’s lunchbox. This is the world of the seed savers of the Southern Appalachians. From the men and women who practice seed conservation as part of daily life, we can learn important lessons about eating wholesomely and living more holistically.

Until the advent of commercially available seed stock, the practice of saving harvested seeds for future planting was born of necessity; sustainability of the food supply was an immediate, ever-present concern. The European pioneers who settled in western North Carolina and Kentucky brought seeds from their homelands and the eastern colonies, obtaining others from the indigenous Native people who had long planted varieties of corn.

The varieties that flourished in the upper South were carefully preserved, and new strains that proved desirable—created through natural mutation or deliberately, by crossbreeding experimentation—were added to the local seed stock. This approach has yielded a diverse array of beans, corn, tomatoes, apples, and other fruits and vegetables prized for their flavor, texture, productivity, suita-

bility for preserving, and eye appeal. In short, they both taste good and work well in the locale.

This localized method of creating, disseminating, and preserving varieties stands in sharp contrast to the commercial system of genetic modification, corporate patents, and global marketing. As the stories in this volume reveal, the preservation of a particular variety of bean can often be traced to the dedicated efforts of a single individual over many years, experimenting with a new variety or simply planting, harvesting, and preserving seeds to ensure that a longtime favorite makes it into succeeding generations. Seed sharing follows the contours of traditional community life, as gardeners distribute a variety to family members, friends, and neighbors. Some growers freely share a prized bean with anyone likely to cultivate it, in order to ensure its preservation. Others more proprietary by nature might hoard their stock, prompting a neighbor to raid a garden late at night in an act of seed liberation. Even today some rural communities continue the barter system of acquiring goods and services, and seeds play a role in such exchanges: they may be traded for supplies, slipped across the table at a church picnic, or offered to entice support for a political candidate. Exchanging seeds clearly produces more than food; it is an act of profound social meaning, nurturing community and family bonds.

At the hardware store, the church supper, or the family reunion, telling stories about seeds and the giving of seeds constitute a distinct type of knowledge exchange. This system of knowledge creation and transmission challenges the dominant narrative about who is an authority and whose knowledge prevails in society. Unlike academic and corporate professionals, who tend to speak mainly to their peers in journal articles and who see seeds as commodities for patent protection, the experts in the world of seed saving are imbedded in their communities, and they have built their knowledge base—and, frankly, their passion—

through a lifetime of in-the-field experience and careful observation. The displacement of just this sort of local knowledge is what marked the transition to modern agriculture, with the advent of university-trained agriculture experts selling their version of a brighter future at rural farmers' institutes and extension offices. The speakers in this volume return us to the once-prevalent, surprisingly persistent world of neighbors with brains worth picking.

Author Bill Best brings alive a range of keepers, many with specialized knowledge. We meet, for example, an expert in tree grafting, a critical skill for preserving heirloom fruits. Many varieties of beans are named after the women who developed and preserved them, affirming the primary role of women as knowledge bearers. At the same time, the author demonstrates how the modern seed-saver network actively incorporates the Internet, providing an interesting case study of the interplay of orally transmitted traditional knowledge and modern technology.

The author's stories about gardening convey a deep sense of regional history and folklore. We learn about Daniel Boone's pioneer exploits, the Trail of Tears that removed Cherokees from their homeland, methods of tobacco cultivation, local politics, and the recent migrations that have shaped the transmission of seeds across space and time.

Beyond the obvious functional impact of seed saving, seeds and plants feature significantly in Appalachian expressive culture. As Best notes, one need look no further to appreciate the cultural significance of beans than "Jack and the Bean Stalk" and the other Jack tales, stories famous in western North Carolina and eastern Kentucky, where the author has spent his life. Among the seed savers mentioned is Letha Hicks, drawing us to note the connection of saving seeds and saving stories. Jack tales, of European and Celtic origin, were preserved in America principally by the Hicks family of the Beech Mountain region of western North Carolina. Ray Hicks, who in 1983 received a National Her-

itage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts as a teller of these tales, learned them as a boy from his elders, who told the stories while canning or drying apples. In a region where beans are a staple of necessity and hardship presents many obstacles, it is easy to understand the appeal of stories in which magical beans and individual pluck enable success.

One of the most popular fiddle tunes of the Southern Appalachians is “Leather Britches,” a title that refers to a way of preserving long beans. Before the widespread use of freezing or canning, people would string mature beans together and air-dry them for several weeks, preserving these “leather breeches” (britches) for later rehydration and cooking.

In the broadest sense, seed saving is an act of connection to place. Heirloom varieties bear the names of the people, animals, materials, and motivations that define local life. When we read of Ora’s Speckled Bean, Brown Goose, White Case Knife, and Radiator Charlie’s Mortgage Lifter, we have a sense of a story behind each one. The community that sustains these heirloom fruits and vegetables stands as a telling counterpoint to the contemporary notion that rapid mobility and separation from friends and family are what life is and should be—the uncritically accepted norm. A poignant reminder of seeds as a connection to place is the effort of those who have left Appalachia to secure and cultivate the varieties they knew back home.

Again in contrast to the big and the uniform in agriculture, Best refocuses our attention to an intimate scale. He invites us to notice the distinctive texture of a greasy bean, the compactness of beans in a pod, or how a tomato seems to taste better when accompanied by the smell of field tobacco.

Today, local efforts to preserve heirloom seeds have become part of a growing national movement. Seed swaps among neighbors at the local store have given way to a network of enthusiasts, regional educators, and nonprofit groups exchanging on the Internet. “Local” is harder to define these days, surely. Yet it is fair

to say that these savers constitute an alternative agricultural world, one that operates on assumptions and values that sharply contrast with those of global agribusiness.

There is undeniably an element of the romantic in tending to seeds as if life depends on them. But it is only modern rationality, with its devotion to finding a technical solution to any problem, that prompts us to reject the romantic as superfluous. Perhaps there is inherent value in the dirty fingernails and slightly aching spine, and the curiosity and dedication that people bring to toiling in a small garden and helping plants grow. These stories offer a critical perspective on our own lives, beginning with what we sit down to eat at the dinner table. All this, from the planting of a seed.

Howard L. Sacks teaches sociology at Kenyon College, where he directs the Rural Life Center. For the past fifteen years, he has led an initiative to build a sustainable local food system in Knox County, Ohio. He and his wife, Judy, raise sheep on their farm near Gambier.

Preface

A FEW YEARS ago, savers of heirloom seeds were thought to be a little bit eccentric or worse. After all, everyone knew that the many seed companies peddling their wares were looking out for America's gardeners and maintaining an abundance of varieties for each and every purpose and growing condition.

Gardening fell out of favor with many Americans as "Super" markets made available more selections than most people had ever known. The United States pursued a cheap food policy, with land grant universities leading the charge to make food available as cheaply as possible, and with the government also making surplus foods available to public schools and other agencies.

But somewhere along the food superhighway, there came to be a few bumps in the road. Small seed companies were swallowed up by larger seed companies, and larger seed companies were swallowed up by international food, feed, seed, and chemical conglomerates that tended not to take very seriously their responsibilities in maintaining genetic diversity and producing quality foods.

Food plants were genetically modified to make mechanical harvesting and long-distance shipping over great distances easier. Vegetables were toughened up and made more uniform so that they could be harvested by machine with one pass at one time. American food production left the "Garden State" and other states close to population centers and moved to California and Florida, if not as far afield as Mexico, South America, and even Europe and Asia.

Genetic engineering replaced the preservation of genetic diversity, and companies ridded themselves of thousands of varieties that had been maintained by the smaller companies that were cannibalized during the consolidation process. This even included many of the early hybrids that were bred for flavor, texture, and nutrition. Suddenly toughness was the byword for all things fruit and vegetable.

But a funny thing happened on the way to modernity. Many people started having doubts about the brave new world of genetic engineering, food-borne diseases, childhood obesity, adult-onset diabetes in young children, and food companies using the courts to squeeze out the small farmers by patenting the pollen in the air. Suddenly a collective “Enough!” was heard from sea to shining sea.

This book is about a small part of that “Enough!” We eccentrics are now being heard.

Saving Seeds, Preserving Taste



An Introduction to Heritage and Heirloom Seed Saving

I GREW UP believing that the Goose Bean was discovered by my great-grandfather Sanford. My mother had told me that he had shot a wild goose and her grandmother had discovered some bean seeds in its craw as she was dressing it for a meal. The beans were planted, grew to maturity, had a good flavor, and became one of many varieties of beans kept by our family.

Years later I discovered that many children in the Southern Appalachians had been told the same story by their parents. Essentially the same tale was also told about the Turkey Craw Bean: a wild turkey had been shot for food, bean seeds were found in its craw, and the seeds had been planted and found to be among the best beans around.

The Goose Bean is also known as the Goose Craw Bean and in some areas as the Goose Neck Bean. The Turkey Craw Bean is



Margaret Sanford Best at age eighty. *Photo by Paul Toti*

sometimes just called the Turkey Bean. Both beans are among the favorites of thousands of families in the Southern Appalachians and in other parts of the country where many Appalachian families have migrated.

As is true of many other families in our community, beans were very important to us. When we visited my grandmother Sanford most Sunday afternoons, as a very young child I followed her and my mother to Grandma's garden. They talked gardening while I explored and sometimes listened to their conversations. I later realized that Grandma Sanford was continuing to pass on her gardening traditions to Mother, who was later to pass them on to me. And Grandma Sanford was passing on traditions she had learned from her family decades earlier. Perhaps the most important tradition being passed on was seed saving.

What is important here is the fact that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of heirloom bean varieties maintained by gardeners in the Southern Appalachians. They are also preserved, often in their purest forms, by Appalachian migrants to other parts of the country. Many people migrated to places as far away as Washington State and took their beans with them. For example, there is a bean in Washington State that is called the Tarheel Bean, which, I have been told by several people, was taken from the Jackson/Haywood County area of North Carolina. (My mother's oldest, and only, sister migrated with her husband from Haywood County to Kelso, Washington, in 1918 to work in the timber industry.) Another bean variety now in Washington State was sent to me by a retired Forest Service employee who had taken it with him from West Virginia when he retired. And, of course, there is the famous Trail of Tears Bean, taken from western North Carolina and northern Georgia by the Cherokees when they were forced out of the Southern Appalachians into the Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) by the federal government in the 1830s.

Until I was in my midtwenties and going to college and graduate school and then serving in the army, I helped my family with

its gardens and other crops when I was home during the summers. After starting college I was rarely there for bean plantings, but on those occasions I was conscious that we still planted beans that my mother had saved from previous years. By that time I knew that bean seeds could be bought from farm stores and from seed catalogues as well, but there was no point in doing so. There were so many varieties in the general area that it was pointless to pay good (and scarce) money for seeds.

However, when I was in my late twenties and starting to garden on my own with my young family, I purchased some seeds from commercial sources. My wife and I had bought a farm in Kentucky that had land similar to that of my home in Haywood County, North Carolina, with basically the same growing season. Our land had a garden plot that had been used for generations, and the soil was exceptionally fertile.

That first summer we had a bumper crop of good tomatoes, sweet corn, okra, and potatoes, but I was in for a rude awakening because of the toughness of the beans we were growing. It had not occurred to me that beans might become inedible because of the toughness of their hulls at any stage of their development. I certainly did not think that a lot of time and money had been spent by seed companies and universities to create tough beans that would not break during mechanical harvest.

When we visited my parents that following Thanksgiving, I told my mother about our bean experience, and she promptly gave me some of her seeds, which had not been contaminated by the tough gene being used almost universally in commercial beans by that time. Unfortunately, I neglected to put her seeds in our freezer, and the beans had holes in them from bean weevils by the time I got ready to plant them in our garden the following summer.

That was lesson number two: always keep bean seeds in airtight containers and refrigerated or frozen until time to plant them. The first lesson, of course, was to stay away from commercial beans entirely. Before Mother had refrigeration (which she got

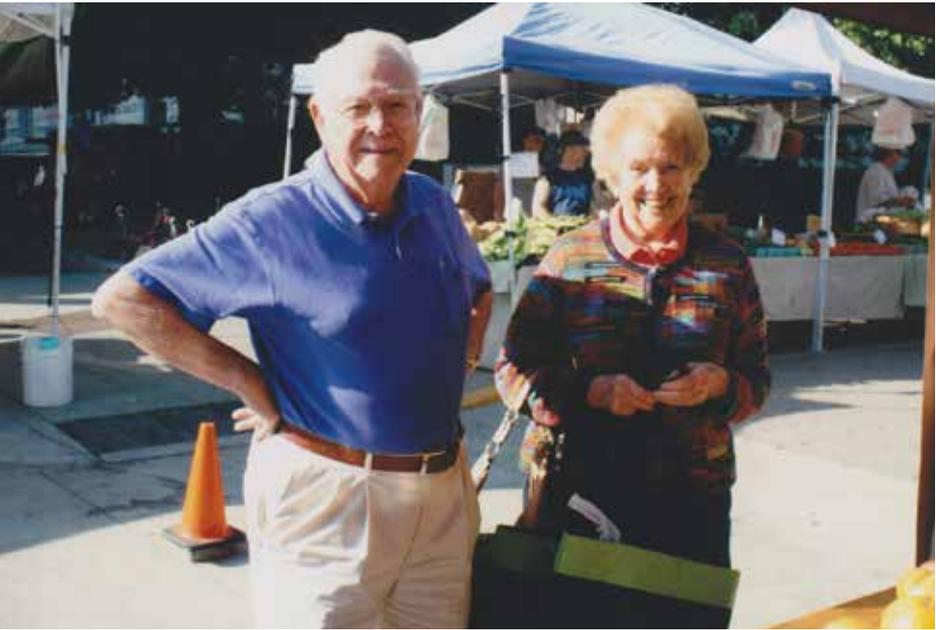


Bill Best with customers at Lexington Farmers Market. *Photo by Michael Best*

about the time I left for college), she had put mothballs or hot peppers in her bean containers; that kept the weevils at bay but also gave the beans a bad smell—and your hands, too, when planting them.

When I started selling heirloom beans at the Lexington Farmers Market in the early 1970s, I charged more per pound for them than did vendors selling commercial machine-harvested beans that they had purchased for resale. Not long afterward, I noticed something about the buying habits of many customers: they would buy several pounds of commercial, stringless beans from other vendors and then buy a pound or two of “full” beans from me.

When I finally asked why this was so, my customers told me that they were buying my beans “to flavor” the ones they had already bought. As I came to know more of my customers, I realized



Dr. Graydon Long and Mrs. Virginia Long, customers for over thirty years

that most of the ones who bought my beans to flavor the others were migrants to Lexington from eastern Kentucky or mountain counties in other states. They liked the cheap prices of the commercial beans but also wanted taste and texture if possible. They also liked having a few “real” beans mixed in with the commercial beans, which consisted almost entirely of hulls.

As vendors selling commercial beans, usually bought from produce terminals, started raising their prices to have a higher profit margin and their prices became closer to those of heirloom beans, many, if not most, of the heirloom bean lovers started buying only heirloom beans when they were available. They decided that quality was worth the price, especially if there was little difference between the prices. As more eastern Kentucky

transplants started coming to the market, many of them shared some of their family beans with the vendors who were interested in growing them for the market.

Another grower started selling heirloom beans about the same time I started, and we traded seeds with one another. By working together and making referrals to one another, we soon had a lot of customers buying heirloom beans—and not just those people who had grown and eaten such beans in their earlier years. Soon heirloom beans came to be in demand by people who had never eaten any beans other than the commercial, machine-harvested ones.

In 1988, freelance writer Judy Sizemore wrote an article about our small farming operation for *The Rural Kentuckian* (now *Kentucky Living*). In the article, she described the ways we had come to participate in the Lexington and Berea farmers' markets and the fruits and vegetables we had been growing and selling for many years. She also described the heirloom beans and tomatoes we were growing, especially the greasy beans (so named because they have slick hulls and look as if they have a thin coat of grease on them).

Within a week after the article came out, I started getting phone calls and letters from people interested in purchasing some of our greasy beans. Almost without exception the phone calls and letters spoke of the superiority of heirloom beans when compared to commercial beans. Many customers wanted to purchase greasy beans to grow in their own gardens, while several proposed trading seeds with me. Others simply wished to send me beans that had been in their families for generations that they would like to see spread around.

One man from London, Kentucky, came by our house and brought an heirloom bean from Morgan County, Kentucky, called the Nickell Bean. I gave him some of our beans in return but unfortunately did not get his name and address, since I had not yet started formally collecting bean varieties and was unaware of the importance of documentation.

Over the next few months, things began to explode, because



Brian Best, Ron Robinson, and Kathryn Wallace

people were sending the magazine to friends and relatives within Kentucky and in other states. I received eighty-six letters from six states within six months. From those letters and the contacts involved, I became a collector, grower, and distributor of heirloom beans. But I was still working in a very informal way and not documenting enough. I certainly became aware that there were a lot more beans out there than I had thought.

Finally it dawned on me that I was on to something that would come to occupy a lot of my time and energy. I had been slow to realize that I was involved in an activity that dealt with a lot of history and culture and also tapped into widespread unhappiness with the state of the modern food supply—a food supply increasingly dominated by large corporate farms and multinational food/feed/seed/chemical conglomerates. (And this was long before the

outbreaks of mad cow disease and the more recent problems with tainted food from other countries and the problems with *E. coli*, salmonella, listeria, and other food-borne pathogens.)

I needed assistance from as many interested people as possible, so in cooperation with my youngest son, an agricultural economics professor, and several other people interested in heirloom fruits and vegetables and sustainable agriculture in general, we formed a not-for-profit corporation, the Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center, to develop a seed bank that would house the growing number of heirloom beans (and other vegetables) in my collection.

My son, Michael Best, directed the organization for its first three years and then went back to university teaching. I have directed it since that time, taking the position some years after my retirement from Berea College. Other members of the board come from three states and include retired college professors, a graduate school dean, an educational TV producer, and growers of heirloom fruits and vegetables.

When we set up our website, www.heirlooms.org, the organization became the focal point for many seed savers and others wishing to become involved with heirloom gardening. I started receiving Appalachian heirloom beans from people in many states and requests from hundreds of people.

Other growers also bought into the idea of growing and selling quality beans, and today heirloom beans could easily and quickly corner the market if enough were available. But because seeds must be saved and the beans must be picked by hand, there often is not enough supply to meet demand, even with prices at \$3.00 to \$4.00 or more per pound.

Thank you for your interest in this
Ohio University Press title.

This book is available for purchase
[online at our website](#) or through
other ebooks vendors.

**OHIO
UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

**SWALLOW
PRESS**