

**What's in an Heirloom Seed?**  
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On occasion I receive calls concerning heirloom seeds. Most callers wish to know what an heirloom variety is, where to get seeds, and whether or not the seeds can be saved for future gardening seasons.

Defining an heirloom variety is not an easy task. Most recognize an heirloom as one that has been handed down generation to generation for at least 50 years; however, there are some people that insist that they must be at least 100 years old. Anyhow, these varieties are those that stay in the family, so to speak. Most heirlooms are usually considered "open pollinated" meaning that man does not manipulate the pollination process to ensure uniformity. Both heirloom and open pollinated varieties are in opposition to the "newer" idea of hybrid seeds.

Hybrids are those that have been bred to exhibit certain traits in the fruit, flowers, foliage, or some other phenotypic expression of certain genes. Typically, one cannot collect seeds from a hybrid variety and save for next year. The traits that make the variety of interest most likely will be lost. Since the genetics of a hybrid are using some recessive genes to control traits it is usually limited how these traits can be passed onto future generations. For example a hybrid petunia that exhibits white flowers will not always produce white flowers in the next generation. Due to the recessive genes you may find that 75 percent of the flowers will be white and 25 percent will be red. The other advantage to using hybrids is that they are often more vigorous than the parents meaning that hybrids in the garden will do better than heirlooms.

Getting back to heirlooms we find that these seeds can be saved due to the fact that the genetics of these have more variability than hybrids. This means that you are not 100 percent sure of what the traits will be but most likely the plants will produce as expected. Most of the traits in heirlooms are caused by dominant genes and saving seed from these plants will produce similar results year after year. There are some exceptions to this rule but overall the traits will be similar.

Finding heirloom seeds is not as difficult as it may seem. Some smaller hardware stores, seed stores, and special interest stores may have a selection of heirlooms available. If you can't find them locally there are several websites that specialize in heirlooms. Seed Savers Exchange ([www.seedsavers.org](http://www.seedsavers.org)) specializes in many different vegetables and other seed. Seeds of Change ([www.seedsofchange.com](http://www.seedsofchange.com)) sell certified organic heirloom seeds. In addition there are many other online sources of heirloom seed, if you search for them.

My answer to those heirloom seed questions depends on what results the gardener would like to expect. If you wish to have nice uniform tomatoes ripening about the same time use hybrids, if you don't mind some variability in the garden try some heirlooms. If you want to save seed go with the heirloom varieties or at least an open pollinated seed. Experiment in the garden and see what works best.

If you have questions or comments about this topic feel free to give me a call at 605-394-2188 or e-mail me at [ricky.abrahamson@sdsu.edu](mailto:ricky.abrahamson@sdsu.edu).