

Heirloom Vegetables for Montana Gardens

By Cheryl Moore-Gough, Extension Horticulturist

Did vegetables really taste better in the “good old days”? Is an heirloom ‘Brandywine’ tomato that much better than a hybrid ‘Early Girl’? It depends, of course, on how you define “better” and “superior” and it depends upon individual preferences.

“HEIRLOOM” IS DIFFICULT TO DEFINE AND MEANS different things to different people, but in general, an heirloom cultivar is one that first appeared more than 50 years ago and often has a documented and interesting history.

Gardeners today are excited about raising heirloom vegetables, even though they generally have poor pest resistance compared to modern hybrids. There is a certain charm about being able to enjoy flavors and textures our forefathers experienced. It is a gardener’s way of touching a long-gone era.

Heirloom names are romantic and colorful. ‘Lazy Housewife,’ also known as ‘White Cranberry’ pole bean, was brought to America by German immigrants about the time of the Civil War. The bean is stringless and very productive and its name implies that even a lazy housewife had time to prepare it for dinner.

In past times, most vegetables were “open pollinated,” meaning that they crossed readily with others of their species.

There were no “man-made” hybrids, so seeds taken from fruit and planted the following year came “true,” or nearly so; that is, they reproduced nearly identical to the parent. For example, if you planted seed from ‘Country Gentleman’ sweet corn or ‘Bloomsdale Long Standing’ spinach, both pollinated by wind, you got ‘Country Gentleman’ or ‘Bloomsdale Long Standing’ again, so long as there were no other corn or spinach cultivars within a mile or so. Other open-pollinated vegetables, like the crucifers, radish, carrots, endive, leeks and onions, parsley, rutabaga and parsnip, are pollinated by insects and need only about 200 yards of isolation from other cultivars.

And best of all, peas, beans, lettuce and many tomatoes are self-pollinated and should need no isolation whatsoever. It’s easy to save their seeds for next season and you can

plant more than one cultivar in the garden without fear of “contamination.” Plant them at opposite ends of the garden though, just to be sure. What is now the standard practice of purchasing all seeds only began in earnest after World War II. Until that time, and for about 20 years after, many gardeners saved the seeds from their best open-pollinated plants to plant year after year.

During the 1950s and 60s, hybrid crops that were generally more vigorous and pest resistant and produced pretty, uniform fruit became mainstream. But seed saved from ‘Bodacious’ F1 hybrid sweet corn and planted the following year will not produce ‘Bodacious’ sweet corn, as the corn genes segregate in the second generation. As the old cultivars disappeared, we lost something less tangible. Perhaps we miss the imperfections (and colorful names) of ‘Bull’s Blood’ beet, ‘Rhode Island Asylum’ sweet corn, and ‘Cow’s Horn’ carrots. They came from a simpler time; they had character.

In the 1970s, reactionary gardeners rejected the “perfect” hybrids and began to turn back to the heirloom cultivars to rediscover the trials and tribulations of gardening a century or more ago. But heirlooms have their downsides. Many are adapted only locally. What grows well in Maryland may not perform at all in Malta, Montana.

Many need a long season to mature or require too much space for today’s gardens. As mentioned above, most have poor pest resistance, and all the blemishes that come from a wilder, more romantic era. Nevertheless, by careful choice you can find an heirloom that is right.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the original author of this MontGuide, Dr. Bob Gough, former Extension Horticulture Specialist.

N A small sample of heirloom vegetables that should do well in Montana gardens.

Vegetable	Cultivar	Season (days)	Year Introduced & Origin	Notes
Bean <i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i>	Burpee's Stringless Green Pod	50 – 55	1894 (NY)	Heat and drought tolerant. Claimed to be the only stringless green-podded bush bean.
	Lazy Wife (White Cranberry)	75 – 80	1810 (PA)	Claimed to be the first stringless pole snap bean. Several stories circulate regarding the source of the name.
	Kentucky Wonder (Old Homestead)	58 – 72	1850s (KY)	Originally sold in 1864 as 'Texas Pole'; reintroduced in 1877 as 'Kentucky Wonder.' Very popular and widely adapted pole bean.
	Black Valentine	48 – 70	Before 1850	6" pods have shiny black seeds. Snap bean when young; shell when mature.
	Scarlet Runner	65 – 90	1600s (South America)	One of the oldest runner beans still planted. Use for snap or shell.
Beet <i>Beta vulgaris</i> var. <i>crassa</i>	Bull's Blood	35	1800s (Netherlands)	Grown for dark red leaves; no edible root.
	Chioggia	55	1840s (Italy)	Pretty candy stripe rings are retained if baked whole and sliced just before serving.
	Detroit Dark Red	55 – 60	1892 (United States)	The beet standard; good for table or canning; tasty greens.
	Early Wonder	50 – 60	1911 (United States)	Best of the earliest beet roots. Also good for greens.
	Golden Beet	55 – 60	Before 1828	Orange roots turn golden when cooked. Tasty tops. Low germination.
Broccoli <i>Brassica oleracea</i> var. <i>italica</i>	Calabrese	60 – 90	1880s (Italy)	8" head. Multiple side shoots follow main harvest. Freezes well.
	DeCicco	48 – 85	1890 (Italy)	4" head. Multiple side shoots follow main harvest. Long harvest period.
Brussels sprouts <i>Brassica oleracea</i> var. <i>gemmifera</i>	Long Island Improved	85 – 115	1890s	Semi-dwarf. Main commercial cultivar before advent of hybrids.
	Early Jersey Wakefield	60 – 75	1840 (England)	Very early conical heads. Small plants may be planted closely.
Cabbage <i>Brassica oleracea</i> var. <i>capitata</i>	Danish Ballhead	85 – 110	15th Century (Denmark)	Bolt and split resistant. Does well in cool seasons.
	Chantenay Red Cored	60 – 75	Late 1800s (Europe)	Good for heavy soils. Sweetens in storage. Roots 5" – 7" long.
Carrot <i>Daucus carota</i>	Danvers Half Long	65 – 87	1871 (MA)	Stores well.
	Imperator	70 – 75	1928 (US)	AAS selection ³ . 8" to 9" long roots require loose soil.
	Oxheart (Guemade)	70 – 80	1884 (France)	Short thick roots. Stores well. Good for heavy soil.
Cauliflower <i>Brassica oleracea</i> var. <i>botrytis</i>	Early Snowball	60 – 85	1888	6 – 7" heads. Small plants mature over 2-3 weeks.
	Country Gentleman (Shoe Peg)	88 – 100	1890 (CT)	White corn with deep, small 'shoe peg' (non-rowed) kernels.
Corn, Sweet <i>Zea mays</i>	Stowell's Evergreen	80 – 100	1849 (NJ)	Once a leading white cultivar for home and market growers.
	Golden Bantam	70 – 85	1902 (MA)	One of the first yellow sweet corns considered suitable for human use. Remains the standard for open-pollinated sweet corn.
Cucumber <i>Cucumis sativus</i>	Lemon	58 – 70	1894 (Australia)	Slicing. Looks like a lemon and is a great kid pleaser.
	Japanese Climbing	58 – 65	1892 (Japan)	Slicing. Best for trellises, wire netting or fences.
	Straight 8	52 – 75	1935 (United States)	AAS selection. Mosaic resistant. 8" – 9" fruit.
Garlic <i>Allium sativum</i>	Chesnok Red (Shvelisi)	Sept. to Aug.	(Georgia Republic) ¹	8 to 12 cloves per bulb; purple striped. Hardneck.
	Inchelium Red	Sept. to Aug.	(WA) ¹	Large bulbs with 8 to 20 cloves. Artichoke type. Softneck.
	Spanish Roja	Sept. to Aug.	Before 1900	6 to 13 cloves per bulb. Rocambole type. Hardneck.

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Kale <i>Brassica oleracea</i> var. <i>acephala</i>	Red Russian (Buda Kale, Ragged Jack)	50 – 60	1863 (Russia)	Brought to Canada by Russian traders. Leaves with red veins. Hardy to -10°F and may overwinter.
	Lacinato (Tuscan Black Palm)	62	1885 (Italy)	Primitive, open growth habit; leaves heavily savoyed (puckered). Heat and cold tolerant.
Kohlrabi <i>Brassica oleracea</i> var. <i>gongylodes</i>	Early White Vienna	55 – 60	Before 1860 (Austria)	Pale green globes. Developed in Austria in the 1840s and introduced into the U.S. in the 1860s.
	Early Purple Vienna	55 – 60	Before 1860	Attractive purple globes.
Leek <i>Allium ampeloprasum</i> var. <i>porrum</i>	Blue Solaise (Bleu de Solaise)	105	(France) ¹	Very ornamental, turning violet after a hard frost. Very hardy and good for short seasons.
	Giant Musselburgh	80 – 150	1870 (Scotland)	Hardy and mild.
Lettuce <i>Lactuca sativa</i>	Black Seeded Simpson	50 – 55	1850	Also known as 'First Early,' 'Earliest Cutting,' 'Carters Long Standing' and 'Longstreats Earliest.' Widely adapted.
	Green Oakleaf	50	1771, possibly 1686	Also known as 'Baltimore' or 'Philadelphia Oakleaf.'
	Red Deer Tongue	60 – 65	1740s	There is also a green cultivar. Grown in most pioneer gardens.
	Tennis Ball	50	Before 1804	7" diameter loose heads. Grown by Thomas Jefferson.
	Tom Thumb	50 – 55	1830 (England)	Small butterhead is perfect for small home gardens.
	Forellenschuss (Trout Back)	55 – 65	1793 ²	Many spotted cultivars have confused backgrounds.
Melons <i>Cucumis melo</i>	Emerald Gem	70 – 90	1886 (United States)	The most popular melon in the late 19th century.
	Jenny Lind	70 – 85	Before 1846 (Armenia) ²	Early maturing and good for northern gardens. Short, disease resistant plants.
Onion <i>Allium cepa</i>	Ailsa Craig	100	1887 (England) ²	Best for fresh use. Yellow-skinned.
	Yellow Ebenezer	100	1906 (Japan)	Early maturing. Good for northern gardens.
<i>Allium fistulosum</i>	Evergreen White Bunching	60 – 80	1880s	Grown for green onions as they do not form bulbs. Hardy.
Parsnip <i>Pastinaca sativa</i>	Hollow Crown	95 – 135	Before 1852	Still a widelygrown commercial cultivar.
	Dwarf Gray Sugar	60 – 75	Before 1773	Edible pod. Stringless and fiberless. Does not require staking.
Pea <i>Pisum sativum</i>	Thomas Laxton	55 – 65	1898	Shell pea named for a famous pea breeder. Good for freezing.
Pepper <i>Capsicum annuum</i>	Jimmy Nardello's Sweet Italian Frying Pepper (Nardello)	80 – 90	1887 (Italy)	Stake to support heavy fruit load. Pungent green fruits ripen to a sweet red. Good for frying or for tomato sauce.
	Irish Cobbler	90	Before 1876 (NJ)	Selected from a seed ball of 'Early Rose' by an Irish shoemaker.
Potato <i>Solanum tuberosum</i>	Russet Burbank (Netted Gem)	80-90	1874 (CA)	Also selected from a seed ball of 'Early Rose'. NOTE: Always purchase certified disease free seed to protect Montana's potato industry. Never plant table stock.

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Pumpkin and Squash <i>Cucurbita</i> spp.	Table Queen	59 – 90	1913 (US)	Believed to have been developed from a strain grown by the Arikara tribe. Vines are 6 – 8' long. Acorn type winter squash.
	Delicata	80 – 100	1894 (US)	Uncommon since the 1920s, it has recently reappeared in seed catalogs. Winter squash.
	Early Yellow Summer Crookneck	50 – 55	About 1700 (US)	Easy to grow bush summer squash.
	Fordhook Acorn	56 – 85	1890 (US)	Burpee isolated this from the Mandan-Arikara squash. Vining plant.
	White Bush Scallop (Patty Pan)	45 – 55	Before 1722 (US)	White and yellow bush scallop of Native American origin.
	Small Sugar	80 – 110	Before 1860 (US)	Small pumpkin fruit about 6" in diameter; very good for pies.
Radish <i>Raphanus sativus</i>	French Breakfast	30	1879	Red with a white tip. Blunt, oblong shape.
	White Icicle (Lady Finger, White Naples, White Italian)	27 – 32	Before 1896	Long white carrot-shaped roots.
Spinach <i>Spinacea oleracea</i>	Bloomsdale Long Standing	39 – 60	1925	Leaves are dark and glossy, crumpled, twisted and savoyed. Heavy yielding, slow bolting.
	New Zealand	50 – 70	1770 (New Zealand)	Not a true spinach but used as spinach. Large spreading plants.
Swiss Chard <i>Beta vulgaris</i> var. <i>cicla</i>	Five Color Silver Beet (Rainbow Chard)	50 – 60	1 (Europe)	Variable midrib colors. Tasty mild foliage. Vigorous grower.
	Fordhook Giant	50 – 60	About 1750	Very vigorous white stalks.
	Rhubarb Chard	50 – 60	1857 (Europe)	Also known as Ruby Chard. Pretty deep red, juicy stalks.
	Black Sea Man	75	Russia ¹	Large, pinkish-brown, rich tasting fruits are excellent for slicing. Determinate.
Tomato <i>Solanum lycopersicon</i>	Brandywine	90	1885	Large pink beefsteak fruit are arguably one of the best tasting available. Indeterminate vines. May be too late for most Montana gardens.
	Cherokee Purple	80	Before 1890 (TN)	Dark green shoulders and brownish purple skin. Flavor rivals 'Brandywine'. Indeterminate vines.
	Riesentraube	75 – 80	Before 1847	Grown by Pennsylvania Dutch, the name translates as "giant bunches of grapes." 1" diameter fruits. Indeterminate vines.
Turnip <i>Brassica rapa</i>	Trophy	80	1870	Slicing. Indeterminate vines.
	Purple Top White Globe	45 – 65	Before 1880	Stores well. Best for eating when 3 – 4" in diameter. The standard for garden turnips.

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MT200804AG, REVISED 3/20
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(VEGETABLES)

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