

Organic Gardening with Heirloom Variety Plants

Late summer is a delightful time in the garden. The tomatoes, peppers, peas, okra, beans, melons and corn are coming in strong. The spring sections of our garden have been tilled up and pumpkin, winter squash and late tomatoes are all showing sign. A favorite bean of mine is Dean's Heirloom Purple. Trellised teepee style, it abundantly produces an unusual purple pole that turns green when cooked and can't be beat for flavor.

Heirlooms are generally considered to be plants grown from seeds preserved in a region 40-50 years and are all openly pollinated. Hybrids are developed commercially to resist disease and have more reliable production but do not



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reseed properly. Although we grow a few hybrids like Early Girl tomato or Silver Queen corn, the many other old timey plants found throughout our garden find a special place in our hearts with their unexpected shapes, colors and flavor.

In our quarter acre organic garden on the Plateau you'll find many heirlooms including a melon called Yellow Moon and Stars, which has a mouth watering yellow watermelon meat. We grow lots of unusual tomatoes like Cherokee, Red & Yellow, Old German, Pink Girl, Rutgers, tiny Yellow Bells and Persimmon Rose.

We plant tomatoes starting in April and with heavy mulching enjoy them into late fall even with frosts. We never water after the initial planting and our plants handle droughts well, their roots reaching deep into the ground. The mulch also helps keep rain water from splashing the blight, found in Tennessee's soil, up to the plants. Heirlooms, although more susceptible to disease than hybrids, seem to survive any blight if you cut the diseased leaves off early on when they first appear and dispose of them away from the garden, tie up the plants so they don't touch the ground and work in the garden when it is dry.

Unique organic heirloom seeds

and seedlings can be found more and more at our local nurseries and farmer's markets or ordered from regional specialty companies. Southern Exposure (www.southernexposure.com) specializes in mid-Atlantic heirloom varieties and I purchase others from local farmers found on www.localharvest.org and www.pick-Tnproducts.org. Always plant heirlooms and hybrids apart to avoid cross pollination.

Companion planting tomatoes with basil and cilantro; and other vegetables with flowers such as hollyhocks, French marigolds, cosmos, zinnias, nasturtiums and petunias looks pretty and invites beneficial insects to stay a while in the neighborhood. Consider giving flowers some of that valuable garden real estate and enjoy their beauty and benefits all summer long.

Sometimes our heirloom organic veggies and fruit don't look as perfect as those in the store but the taste and variety are exceptional. When confronted with pest or disease issues, we sometimes resort to organic sprays such as neem (evergreen) oil or practices such as sprinkling crushed seashell powder lightly on the ground around plants (damages the respiratory system of tiny pests) and as a last resort we may use a certified organic bacterial solution which kills the tiny white caterpillars that love cabbage and broccoli.

The problem with organic bacteria solutions is that it also destroys some beneficial insects so use it very sparingly and never on flowers. The mold developing on our concord grapes, due to heavy spring rains, was kept in check with baking soda and water (1/4 cup of baking powder to each quart of water).



Heirloom varieties of peppers, tomatoes, beans and cucumbers

Visit your garden a little each day and you can keep little problems from becoming bigger. For borers put a board out early on under the plants at night and for a few days collect the sleepy little guys clinging to the bottom of the board in the morning. A friend of ours covers all her vegetable seedlings with a cloth crop cover and reports her early pest problems are nonexistent.

Everyone has a different method of organic gardening and more and more folks are finding an explosion of flavor and color in heirloom varieties. The essentials to remember are having rich non-depleted soil, companion planting, using disease resistant regional varieties and practicing crop rotation which helps bad insect patterns from developing and enriches the soil.

In return you'll not only get a break from breathing and eating unhealthy pesticides, you'll also enjoy butterflies, flowers and new found garden treats waiting for you to discover.

Ilaeka Villa & her father Phil Bourne own Grandview Mountain Cottages (www.grandviewmountaincottages.com), a green-friendly resort with upscale country vacation cottage rentals, B&B amenities & organic catering on a 145 acre family farm. 423-365-4412.

Flowers are beneficial to an organic garden



Purple beans