

Diversity and the Kitchen Garden

There are many reasons to start and maintain a kitchen garden, from having your own supply of very local healthy produce to enjoying the activity and beauty of your garden. An added reward for me is growing a diversity of foods that cannot be bought in local markets – even at farmers markets.

What happens when you mix European, Asian, South American and Mexican food plants with Southwest natives and early Spanish introductions in a backyard kitchen garden? Well, I can tell you that it creates tasty gardening and dining experiences. Although unknown numbers of heritage food plants have been lost through changes in tastes and technologies, many varieties are maintained today by the efforts of seed banks, gardeners, seed exchanges and regional growers. This network dedicated to seed diversity is expanding today in spite of, or because of, the consolidation in seed companies. For native southwest desert food plants and adopted Spanish introductions, Native Seed SEARCH is the place to begin exploring our local food heritage.

Last year I discovered Hopi Pumpkin which replaced all other varieties of zucchini in my garden, based on taste alone! And there is the added treat of no two fruits looking exactly alike – the result of generations of selection by southwest native farmers. Last summer I also added Hopi Yellow Lima Beans to my garden. I started with 25 seeds and managed, after a couple of failed tries, to get ten vigorous sprawling plants producing a wealth of pods and beans. My first priority was to save a supply of seed. And a good thing I did! They are not offered this year by Native Seed SEARCH, and may not be available again until the next grow-out of that variety (could be a 10 year wait). Well, that's the way it is when you find something you like outside the mainstream, you have maintain your own seed supply from year to year.

So what's new for this year? Well, Native Seed SEARCH has started a program called the Gardeners Network. They are offering free seed and instructions to gardeners in return for growing information and photographs of those varieties in your garden. A networked diversity of gardeners is one of the keys to maintaining plant diversity and here is a great opportunity to participate in growing, eating and preserving our regional heritage. Making choices is the most difficult part of the program. Of the 166 varieties offered in the Garden Network program, how do you choose those that fit your space and taste? Well, that's part of the engagement in it all – adding to your garden, your knowledge and your table while participating in a collective preservation program.

After much agonizing and great restraint, my choices for 2005 are:

- Hopi Black Pinto Bean – *a striking black and white/beige pinto, dry farmed in Hopi fields in northeastern Arizona. It is an early maturing bushy-pole bean with colorful mottled pods. High yielding.* How will it grow at lower elevations, farther south and with some irrigation?

- San Felipe Pueblo White Tepary Bean – *Produces large white seeds mixed with enormous (for a tepary) light tan, flattened seeds. White and lilac flowers with large leaves. It is a recent grow-out of a 1990 collection from 5200ft in New Mexico. How will it produce at 4000ft with and without irrigation?*
- Chapalote “Pinole Maiz” – *One of the four most ancient corns, it is small kernelled with slender ears, and the only brown corn. Makes a sweet meal excellent for pinole. Originally collected in Sinaloa Mexico. Truly an experiment in adding diversity to my garden, table and personal seed bank. Maiz is particularly challenging to grow and maintain in small kitchen gardens.*
- Minnies Apache Hubbard Squash – *A blue ribbon winner at the White Mountain Apache Tribal Fair. Fruits are variable in sizes and shapes, light to dark orange skin with white or tan seeds. Bright orange flesh is non-stringy and sweet. Last offered in the 1991 catalog! Hopefully, it is a winter squash that is as delightful as the Hopi Pumpkin is a summer squash. (Hopi Pumpkin can be grown and stored for winter use, but the mature winter storing form is low in sugar and high in fiber)*

These additions will increase my small collection of regional heritage varieties to an even ten; some growing easily alongside newer cultivars and some replacing them with superior tastes and textures.

If you would like to participate in the Gardeners Network or want more information, contact Suzanne Nelson at snelson@nativeseeds.org or call 520.881.4804. The Native Seed SEARCH web site is at www.nativeseeds.org.

I encourage you to explore our regional diversity of foods and will be delighted to discuss the program with you. There is an expanded version of this article with photographs in [The Monthly Ramble](http://www.darrolshillingburg.com), (www.darrolshillingburg.com) along with additional information about the Gardeners Network program.

Until next month – good gardening and healthy eating.

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