

Renee's Articles: Hybrids and heirlooms: what's best for the home garden

Growing delicious vegetables from seeds is one of the most rewarding of all gardening activities. We gardeners get started doing it with great anticipation and relish. Selecting seed varieties can be a little daunting because there are lots of choices. To further complicate things, both the gardening press and the marketing arm of many of the seed catalogs sing the virtues of older open pollinated, heirloom varieties or sleek new hybrids, implying that one kind is better than the other or even more politically correct. What's a gardener to do! Looking more closely at how open pollinated, heirloom and hybrid seeds are developed and come to market may bring some degree of clarity to the subject.

A few basic definitions are in order to begin any discussion. The term **F-1 hybrid** means the first filial generation made by crossing two different parent varieties, the offspring of which produce a new, uniform seed variety with specific characteristics from both parents. For example, breeders may choose to cross two tomato varieties to make an F-1 hybrid that exhibits the early maturity of one parent with a specific disease resistance of the other. The unique characteristics of an F-1 hybrid are very uniform only in the first generation of seed, so seed saved from F-1 plants will not come true if replanted and may exhibit many distinct types in the second generation, often reverting to various ancestral forms. To produce consistent F-1 hybrids, the original cross must be repeated each season. As in the original cross, this is done through careful and controlled hand pollination and seed production is often offshore, where labor is cheaper. Many common home garden tomatoes, such as Early Girl, Celebrity, or [Carmello](#) are F-1 hybrids, and most commercial fruiting vegetables seen in supermarkets like eggplants, tomatoes, melons and bell peppers are grown from F-1 hybrid varieties.

Open pollinated seeds are a result of either natural or human selection for specific traits, which are then reselected in every crop. The seed is kept true to type through selection and isolation; open pollinated or O.P. seed varieties are pollinated by having bees or wind pollinate the flowers. Their traits are relatively fixed, within a range of variability. For example, if I grew the Brandywine variety of open pollinated tomato in dry Northern California summers year after year and saved seeds only from the best tasting, earliest ripening fruits in my climate zone, I would have a locally adopted strain of Brandywine, varied from the Brandywine seed saved by a gardener in humid, rainy Alabama who has been saving seeds from fruits that produce very well in Alabama, rather than my California conditions.



All **heirloom** varieties are open pollinated, but not all open pollinated varieties can be considered heirlooms. Unfortunately the definition of "heirloom" has been somewhat of a moving target recently, but, generally; it means a variety, that is at least 40-50 years old, no longer available in the commercial seed trade and that has been preserved and kept true in a particular region. So, for example if a particular kind of open pollinated pepper has been grown in Vermont or Maine for 5 or 6 generations and seed has been selected and saved by local growers and gardeners, it would be considered an heirloom variety. Obviously, heirloom varieties have been saved because they have some real virtues. The classic examples are heirloom tomatoes which often have superior flavor, color or texture for home garden situations but lack the holding ability, disease resistance or early maturity, etc., that would make them commercially viable.



"Summer Feast" Heirloom Tomatoes

[List of All Renee's Garden Seeds with Type](#)

(Heirloom, Hybrid, and Open Pollinated)

[Renee's Garden Heirloom Seeds](#)

Seed saving organizations, specialty seed companies and home gardeners have been the agents that have kept heirloom varieties in existence over time, as larger seed companies generally focus on varieties (both O.P. and F-1) with commercial qualities. Fortunately in the last few years the popularity of heirlooms like Mortgage Lifter, Brandywine, and Marvel Stripe tomatoes has been growing rapidly, and some seed producing companies have started to make them available to home garden seed sellers once again.

I think that both hybrid and open pollinated/heirloom varieties deserve a legitimate place in any home garden. Hybrids can offer uniform fruit often with superior disease resistances, reliable productivity and a particular maturity range. So, if I garden in an area that has a very short season with serious soil nematodes, I can choose a tomato hybrid developed to produce ripe fruit early and whose plants resist nematodes. If I garden in containers, I look for F-1 hybrids bred to grow into a short spreading bush with concentrated harvests.

With tomatoes, it is often said that F-1 hybrids lack flavor, but that depends on which ones are planted. It's true that many commercial tomato varieties have not been bred with top flavor as a priority in the USA. But many hybrids bred for home garden, like our hybrid beef steak, [Big Beef](#), taste great, and there are many hybrids from Europe, where flavor has been more commonly a commercial breeding goal, that are quite delicious, like our [Crimson Carmello](#), which was bred in France. Brassica family F-1 hybrids like our [All Seasons broccoli](#), are a first choice in my garden because they are much more resistant to pests, disease, and weather fluctuations, and have been bred to be space saving and compact.

Open pollinated fruiting vegetables also have a lot to offer. If you enjoy saving seed, you can choose those open pollinated varieties that produce the best tasting and easy growing harvests and save seed from their best plants to use every season. It's fun to become a backyard breeder this way and develop your own selected cultivar. Heirloom, open pollinated varieties usually have a beloved local history and may exhibit unusual colors, shapes or flavors. They may ripen over a prolonged season or been selected to do well in a specific area. One of my favorites is [Lemon cucumbers](#). This 100+ year old heirloom variety effortlessly produces loads of fruit just the size and shape of pale colored lemons. They have a mild sweet flavor, crisp texture and thin skins, and our dual purpose: perfect for eating fresh or pickling. I also love planting a rainbow of tomatoes, so by choosing heirlooms, I can go way beyond ordinary red tomatoes and grow big, juicy orbs that ripen up to yellow, orange, pink, bicolored, cream or even purple/black! All have colorful histories and while they may not produce as plentifully or as reliably as F-1 red slicers, I wouldn't be without them every summer.



In the home garden and farm stand arenas of the seed industry, consumers can really influence the market. When gardeners demand lots of choices and make that known to the nurseries or catalogs where they purchase their seed packets, more kinds of open pollinated heirlooms are once again grown out and seeds become available. Chefs and restaurants have also given much more visibility to old varieties by featuring them, as vegetables have moved to the center of the plate in food fashion over the last decade.

As in most areas of life, gardeners can and should celebrate diversity. Ask for and grow both the best hybrids and exceptional heirlooms. Enjoy the process of seeing what successes each growing season produces and keep experimenting with both new F-1 introductions and revitalized old favorites. In the end, gardening is an art in consistent evolution in everyone's backyard, and a full palette of variety options are its tools.

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