

HYBRID VS. HEIRLOOM – WHAT SEEDS TO CHOOSE

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The interest in growing one's own food is increasing by leaps and bounds . . . two of the many reasons why a gardener might want to grow plants from seeds are (1) to save money and (2) to enjoy some unusual plants. A seed packet costing a few dollars typically contains a dozen or more seeds, and the range of plants and varieties available in seed form dwarfs the limited selection of plants seen at most garden centers. However, if you are a beginning gardener, some of the terms used when growing plants from seed can be confusing.

Hybrids

The term "hybrid" describes seed that results from controlled cross-breeding of two different, but very specific, varieties of the same plant. In this process, the male pollen is transferred to the female pistil, pollination occurs and a seed is formed which is then designated as a F1 hybrid seed. The goal is to produce a new variety that is superior to either parent in yield, disease resistance, better taste, etc. However, if you want to save seeds from these F1 hybrids for future sowing, they likely will not breed true the next time around – you will need to start each growing season using F1 seeds from reliable suppliers.

There are benefits to growing hybrids including the fact that plant breeders are able to carefully introduce traits such as improved disease resistance, earlier maturation and better yield. The drawbacks? Hybrid seed tends to be a bit more expensive than non-hybrid and, as stated above, hybrid seed does not breed true the next time around (the plants may not be identical to the parent plant). In addition, this next generation may have poorer yield or produce flowers in a different color. In other words, the offspring will be the same species, but that's about all you can predict.

Heirlooms

These are seeds saved and handed down from one generation to another because of their exceptional flavor, appearance and vigor. Some purists say that for a fruit or vegetable variety to be called an heirloom, it must be at least 50 years old, but more common is that an heirloom refers to old-time favorites such as a 'Brandywine' tomato.

Before hybridization was done, all plants were open-pollinated (pollinated by insects, birds or the wind). The genetic composition of most open-pollinated plants is relatively stable, enough so that the offspring plants will most likely resemble the parents, but only if the parents have not been cross-pollinated. To decrease the likelihood of this happening when planting multiple varieties of any one vegetable, keep them at least 3' feet apart from each other.

One important benefit of growing heirlooms (or open-pollinated) versus hybrids is that you can save your own seed for replanting each year, knowing that you will likely get reasonably uniform results. Also, some gardeners believe that open-pollinated varieties produce better-tasting crops,

but this is a matter of personal taste. Tomatoes are a good example of this, but some heirloom, or open-pollinated, varieties such as 'Brandywine' are susceptible to a number of common tomato diseases, including fusarium and verticillium wilts. If these diseases occur in your garden, you may want to plant some disease-resistant hybrids as insurance.

So, what's best for you? If you need to maximize production in a small space, or if you want all your crops to mature at the same time for easy canning and freezing, or if you've had repeated trouble with plant diseases, consider growing hybrids. If, on the other hand, you want to save seed from year to year, grow open-pollinated plants. It really comes down to personal preference.

The UCCE / El Dorado County Master Gardeners will hold a plant sale on Saturday, April 17, in the parking lot of the Veterans Memorial Building at 130 Placerville Drive in Placerville. It starts at 8 a.m. and hundreds of different plants will be available, including dozens of heirloom vegetables. All sales will benefit our educational outreach programs and the construction of a community demonstration garden. Look for more details in future columns.

The Master Gardeners are presenting Part I of a class on "Organic Gardening" tomorrow, April 3, beginning at 9 a.m. in the Veterans Memorial Building at 130 Placerville Drive in Placerville. We are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville.