

- Speaker 1: [00:00](#) Welcome to the old fashioned on purpose podcast. Anyone who thinks gardening begins in the spring and ends in the fall is missing the best part of the whole year for gardening begins in January with the dream. That's a quote by Josephine Newness and I absolutely love that because there is something just a little bit magical about getting the seed catalogs around the first of the year and circling the ones you want and starting the dreaming process even when it's cold and snowy and windy outside like it is right now. In today's episode, I'm going to dive into all things heirloom seeds. I'll talk about why I love heirlooms, why I've grown them exclusively for eight or nine years now and where I buy my favorite seeds. I'm your host Jill Winger and for the last 10 years I've been helping people who feel disenchanting by modern culture. I'll show you how to create the life you really want by learning how to grow your own food and master old fashioned skills.
- Speaker 1: [01:14](#) So I'm hoping as I'm recording this, that you cannot hear the wind noise in the background. This is an exterior wall that's sitting right next to me and there's a window and you can hear the winds blowing up against the building as I speak. So I'm crossing my fingers with the microphone isn't picking that up. But it does underscore this idea of planning gardens when the weather is at its worst because it's definitely pretty brutal right now in Wyoming. So a lot of us gardeners and homesteaders tend to start planning a garden right now. And I know that I love this period of January, February, maybe a little bit of December, but generally December, I'm still in holiday mode with all of those activities going on. But I love to spend primarily January shopping proceeds, ordering seeds and kind of picking out and planning what I want my garden to be like in the upcoming season.
- Speaker 1: [02:24](#) Now I will say that my garden eyes are always bigger than my garden plot. So I usually way over buy and end up buying things that come May, I'm like, why did I buy this? I'm not even sure I want to grow this. But all of that being said, this is the time to get those seed catalogs out or request them from your favorite website and start figuring out what is going to go in the ground once the cold temperatures go away. So I have been using heirloom seeds for almost a decade, I would say. Since my very first garden here on our Prairie homestead, that is the route that I chose to go. And I'm going to talk a little bit more about heirlooms in case you've ever felt confused by them or what constitutes in heirloom. But, I've had a lot of questions about this, so I thought it would be kind of fun to dive into this today.

Speaker 1: [03:27](#) So let's start at the basics. What is an heirloom? And there are some varying definitions as exactly what an heirloom seed is defined by, but I've kind of collected some of the most common thoughts. So we'll just kind of talk through these so you understand the gist. So first off, heirlooms are open pollinated. Now, that just means it sounds fancy, but it just means that the plants have only been exposed to natural pollination methods that would be like wind blowing the pollen or insects or birds. And the contrast of open pollination would be pollination that happens by humans where they're purposely trying to cross different varieties together. So this means that when you plant a seed that is saved from an heirloom plant, that it will produce a plant that is true to type. And so that doesn't always happen when we have hybrids, which makes seed saving a little bit difficult.

Speaker 1: [04:34](#) We'll talk about that more in a second. So keep in mind that all heirlooms by definition are going to be open pollinated, although not all open pollinated seeds are heirlooms. So hopefully that's not too confusing. But, all heirloom seeds will be open pollinated. Just remember that you'll be fine. Another characteristic of heirloom seeds is that they have been passed down from generation to generation. Now, people sometimes have differing opinions on, how long that timeframe must be. But for most folks, they agree that in order to be considered an heirloom, a plant needs to have been around for at least 50 years, kind of passed from family member to family member or from grower to grower. Although many of the varieties that you're seeing in heirloom seed catalogs obviously have been around a lot longer than that. And that just means that that seed that you're getting in that little packet has been lovingly cultivated and preserved and saved by farmers from long ago, or someone's great-great-grandmother or they were grown as a market variety hundreds of years ago.

Speaker 1: [05:51](#) So there's a lot of really cool history that comes with an heirloom seed. Another characteristic would be that heirloom seeds are not hybrids. Now, hybrids are simply a plant that has been artificially crossed with another plant to increase production numbers to make it more colorful, to make it more portable. An example would be, let's take a tomato. So you have a variety of tomato that grows beautiful fruit, big, juicy, red tomatoes. Um, but it doesn't give you very many. So a cultivator may cross, they make a hybrid of this beautiful fruit plant with a different variety that has a higher yield. So he'd cross those two and end up with a tomato that hopefully still has beautiful, juicy fruit and also produces more. So there's nothing wrong with hybridization, right? It is something people

have been doing forever to improve animals or to improve vegetables or fruits.

Speaker 1: [06:57](#) But it does produce often seeds in these hybrids, these, these hybrids that result is the product of the cross that you cannot save. Or if you replant them, they will not be true to type. They'll, they'll take on different characteristics. So you have to repurchase the seed each year if you're growing hybrids, which may not be a big deal to you, or if you are working on having that fully sustainable homestead, that may be a deal breaker. So just know the difference. And then lastly, heirlooms are not genetically modified. Now I see a number of people confusing genetically modified organisms, GMOs with hybrids, and they're not the same thing. A GMO is something that has been altered with molecular genetic techniques. You can't do it at home, you have to have a white coat and a laboratory and a whole bunch of microscopes to make that happen.

Speaker 1: [07:56](#) Versus a hybrid, which technically with just a little bit of knowledge, you could do that or recreate that at home. So there sometimes are GMO seeds in your more traditional, and by traditional I mean conventional seed catalogs. But when you're dealing with heirloom seeds, GMO is off the table. So you don't have to worry about that being an issue, which because of the controversial nature of GMOs, a lot of homesteaders and folks who are into this more natural way of living definitely prefer to steer clear of any possibility that their seeds have been contaminated with genetically modified organisms. So that's kind of the definition in a nutshell of what an heirloom seed is. But why go to the trouble of ordering a special catalog or purchasing these seeds? So there's a lot of reasons. First off the taste, I think that heirloom veggies generally taste better.

Speaker 1: [09:00](#) No, there's exceptions to the rule. Just because something is an heirloom doesn't mean it's automatically going to taste a million times better than a hybrid. But, because they haven't been adjusted and the plants are more true to type, I found that many, most of the time, much of the time the flavors are richer and more robust. So here's an example. A spinach generally, you know, in years past or you know, if you look at grocery store spinach, it's, I've always been kind of like spinach is okay, it's kind of bland, but you know, it's a good filler for salads or, or pasta dishes or whatever. I was not against spinach, but I was just, uh, neutral towards spinach until I grew, an heirloom variety of spinach. I got it from Baker Creek heirloom seeds or what it's called. I'll have to look it up and look at my seed packet.

Speaker 1: [10:00](#) But I grew that, I harvested it. I had never tasted spinach like that in my life. So rich and so spinachy and the flavor was just so much more potent. It was delicious. And I like literally went from a spinach-tolerater to someone who was like craving the spinach and it was just that different heirloom variety. So a lot of times when we get into the more commercial varieties of vegetables, they have been selectively bred to last. That's one of the biggest factors that someone is looking at if they want their vegetables to go across country to a grocery store. So sometimes when we're looking at tomatoes or spinach or whatever they're breeding or hybridizing to make sure it just will handle being transported on the truck or sit on the grocery store shelf without going bad and flavor get sacrificed sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes in that process.

Speaker 1: [11:00](#) So when we take that out, we haven't had all that happen to these heirloom varieties, the taste is just amazing. Also, um, if you save the seeds from some of your heirloom plants, they tend to be adaptable to their location. Um, and some varieties will actually, you know, if you go subsequent years, you save the seed and then save it again and save it again. They, those varieties will start growing better because they have adapted to your environment and your soil and your weather. So that's kind of a cool little bonus that you can't do with a hybridized seed because the seed saving doesn't really work with those varieties. And um, lastly, I think the biggest draw towards heirloom varieties is that you're helping to continue on the legacy and you're helping to make sure that those varieties are around for years to come.

Speaker 1: [11:58](#) They have been preserved and maintained so carefully by people potentially over hundreds of years. And you are ensuring that they are going to be around for many more future generations to come. And I love the stories. Some of the best parts of heirloom seeds are their stories. There are ancient melons from Iraq and corn developed in the mountains of Montana. That's just a little bit heartier than other varieties. And there's globe carrots from France and fluted Italian tomatoes from the early 19th century. And when you look at these catalogs and you go through the stories and little tidbits that are included, it's, it's amazing. It's so much more exciting than just buying a bland generic variety from Walmart, um, the seed counter in the garden department. So it's really, really hard for me to opt for those ho hum kind of boring seeds when I have so many cool stories available.

Speaker 1: [12:57](#) With heirlooms, I know a few tips for you as you grow your heirlooms. They're not that different from regular seeds. So

sometimes I have people ask me, what do I do different and how do I prepare for my heirloom garden? And I'm like, it's pretty much the same. Read the seed packet instructions and you will be fine. A few little tips though for your timing. You will want to order early and you're probably gonna have to do that online or through a catalog. So unless you have some spectacular garden store in your area, which I do not, you're gonna find better varieties online. And I'm going to give you a few of my favorite seed companies in a minute. But I've found that there are occasional organic heirloom seed options at the local stores. But as far as learning the stories and kind of getting the whole experience of shopping for heirlooms, you kind of miss out on that at your average garden store.

Speaker 1: [13:56](#) So order online and get a catalog, and you gotta do it now, January or February. I've made the mistake of waiting till later in the spring, like right before planting thinking I have plenty of time to order my seeds, only to find out that many of the varieties I wanted were sold out. So to get the full gamut of options, order early. And then my last little tip is to read the description in the catalog or on the website to figure out the growing time and any special notes about the climate or location of that variety. I always look at how many days it takes to maturity because obviously Wyoming is crazy short in it's a growing season. It's the first thing I look at. And then I often love the little tidbits that they'll include, um, about, you know, this, this variety grows better here or this variety is great for market, this variety stores well in the pantry, things like that.

Speaker 1: [14:59](#) So take advantage of that information and use it, um, to just increase your odds of success. Okay. I promise to give you my two favorite seed vendors. Now there's many, many heirloom seed vendors and I know that many of you have your own favorites. My favorites are true leaf market, that's trueleafmarket.com. We will include a link in the show notes. You may remember that earlier in an earlier episode of the podcast we talked to true leaf market and they told us all about cover crops. And, at that time I spent a lot of time on our website and I was so impressed by their offerings of organic heirloom seeds. Um, fantastic. So I highly recommend them. They're a cool little company and they have a lot of amazing options, whether you're looking at sprouting seeds or doing cover crops or just planting vegetables in your garden.

Speaker 1: [16:00](#) And then my other favorite option that I've used for many, many years is Baker Creek heirloom seeds. They're very well known in the seed space and their website is rare seeds, R a R E seeds.com and I'll also include that in the show notes if you

want to click it. But they have a beautiful catalog. I get their catalog every year. In fact, mine just came last week and it is an experience reading their catalog, full color, lots of information I go through with a Sharpie and Mark what I want. And they're just really reputable and solid and lots of good options. So that was a lot of info on heirlooms. I hope that inspired you to try something new. Maybe you've done a few heirlooms in the past, maybe you haven't done them at all, but this is your year. They don't cost really any more than a regular packet of seeds and the history and the taste and the beautiful rainbow of colors will just make your garden that much more exciting as you plant them and nurture them. And then of course eat them.

Speaker 1:

[17:10](#)

So that is it for today, my friend. Thanks so much for listening. If you have a minute and you enjoyed this episode, would you mind popping over to your favorite podcast player and leaving a quick review? Every time you do that, it just makes sure that more people can find this podcast and bring homesteading into their lives. And that's all for now. But I will catch up with you on the next episode of the old fashioned on purpose podcast. Happy homesteading.