SEEDS OF WISDOM

Be thankful for heirlooms

By KRISTEN DEVLIN
For the Times

Winter is usually a depressing time for gardeners. We've put our tools into storage and laid to rest any opportunities to play in the dirt.

Some may seek solace in tending to their houseplants, but many retreat to the seductive, colorful pages of favorite seed catalogs. For me, countless winter nights are spent leafing through a stack of seed catalogs, envisioning the garden of my dreams.

Without a solid understanding of seed jargon, seed catalogs can be a source of confusion. Understanding the differences between hybrid, open-pollinated and heirloom seeds and their histories, can make choosing next year's plants much more interesting.

Hybrids are the result of a cross between parent varieties that are genetically different, although usually belonging to the same species. Hybrids were developed to address the needs of large-scale and mechanized farmers. Uniform fruit, even ripening, tough skins and good keeping quality are traits that plant breeders commonly attempt to isolate in hybrid plants and traits that farmers appreciate in their efforts to market their produce.

Hybrids cannot pass on specific traits in the seeds they produce. Thus, consumers have to purchase their hybrid seed year after year, rather than saving their own.

Open-pollinated plants, also known as non-hybrids, are the result of a cross between two parent plants of the same variety. Open-pollinated plants produce offspring just like themselves.

Open-pollination occurs in nature and is the mechanism that allows wild plants to reproduce themselves through their seeds. Growers of open-pollinated plants can save seeds from their most vigorous plants for future planting.

Before the days of hybridization and seed catalogs, gardeners collected seeds from their strongest open-pollinated plants each year. Handed down over many generations, these precious family resources earned the name "heirlooms."

Heirloom plants offer several advantages to home gardeners. Years of prudent selection has resulted in inbred resistance to local diseases and adaptation to local environments and growing seasons.

Further, heirloom vegetables are often nutritionally superior to hybrid varieties. Because seed saving is much too tedious to justify maintaining mediocre plants, only favorites were chosen to pass on. Thus, heirloom varieties available today have stood the test of time and guarantee great flavor.

Perhaps most importantly, growing heirlooms offers us a piece of our history. With names like "Cherokee Trail of Tears" beans, or "Gourd of the Ten Commandments," each heirloom variety comes with a story connecting us to our past.

Heirlooms are also a key to our future. Open-pollinated and heirloom varieties serve as the gene pool plant breeders borrow from when developing hybrids.

The rich genetic diversity that heirlooms offer provides an inexhaustible source of resistance against pests and pathogens, making them crucial to the survival of our food system.

Unfortunately, hybridization has come to dominate the seed market, and we are permanently losing countless non-hybrid species that have been part of our genetic heritage for generations. Hundreds, if not thousands, of heirloom plants that were commercially available as recently as 15 years ago are lost forever, simply because they have not been maintained.

As long as the seed industry is driven by commercial farming needs, it is up to backyard gardeners to preserve this genetic diversity.

Getting started in heirlooms is easy. Small seed companies are beginning to offer a fantastic variety of heirloom seeds. Set yourself up for success by choosing varieties best suited to your climate and starting out with well-known standards like Fordhook Giant Swiss Chard or Brandywine Tomatoes.

Before long, you may find yourself wanting to sample from the thousands of more obscure varieties that are being perpetuated by seed-saving groups.

So if winter finds you wistfully gazing through seed catalogs, why not pick out a few heirlooms to try next spring? Mother Nature has given us much to be thankful for, but it's up to us to preserve the abundance.

Kristen Devlin has been a Master Gardener intern since April. She lives and gardens in Lemont.