

newleaf news

Seeds of Change

for the week of June 2, 2004

By Steve

Having never been a farm-boy, nor terribly inclined to get my hands dirty in the garden (and not having space to do so myself) has left me somewhat at arm's length from the food I eat and sell. I'm not alone in my lack of agrarian proclivities; in 1991 farmers accounted for 1.9 percent of the population, and surely it is less than that today. The number of people who grow at least something that they eat must be higher than that, but in 1935, there were 6.8 million farms in the U.S.

I get a little too into statistics sometimes. My whole point here is that we're all a bit distant from the food that sustains us, and I'd like to touch on an issue that some of us may not know too much about. We hear the term "heirloom" often at farmers markets and in seed catalogs, but it is a term which is not commonly understood. So I'd like to share this bit of info from the Victory Seeds Company about heirlooms and their importance.

When humans ceased their reliance on nature for sustenance and began to

raise their own food, agriculture was born. These first farmers began domesticating wild animals for work, companionship, and for food. They also began a process of selecting plants with specific, desirable traits thus developing new plant varieties.

For eons, societies of the world have been agrarian at their roots. Farming practices evolved but generally remained grounded in the dynamics of nature. Our ancestors knew their soil and their climate intimately. Their life depended on their success in the gardens and fields.

Every spring, they planted. Every summer, they cultivated. Every fall, they harvested. Every year they selected and saved their best seed for next year's planting. And every generation passed these treasures on to the next.

As America entered the 20th century industrialization prompted migrations to the cities. The remaining farms began a spiral of increasing in size, mechanization, and efficiency.

The large seed companies that catered to farmers began to shift from standard seed varieties towards more profitable unstable hybrids. These hybrids were marketed for specific traits that are beneficial to commercial farming operations, i.e. disease resistance, consistent ripening, etc. However, if the farmer were to save and plant seeds from his harvest, the resulting plants generally did not have the same characteristics of the previous or parent generation. This insured a steady cash flow for the seed companies.

Since home gardeners do not typically have the same requirements as commercial farmers, seed companies continued to provide open-pollinated (standard) varieties. For example, we like to harvest tomatoes throughout the season and not all within a

three-day window. Additionally, some families continued the tradition of passing along treasured varieties or what are now termed, "heirloom seeds".

As the 20th century progressed, the small regional seed companies began a process of merging and consolidating. This consolidation often included the dropping of less profitable or similar varieties from the line of the new company. These mergers accelerated at an alarming rate through the 1970s and 1980s. Thousands of old varieties were dropped and forever lost.

In the last 15 years, mergers and consolidations have resulted in a handful of large, international, agri-chemical conglomerates gaining control of the seed industry and ultimately the food supply of the world 1. The stakes are enormous both financially and politically.

These chemical corporations are no different from any other business sectors. They are motivated by shareholder's interests and the bottom line to work towards increasing their influence (power) and income (profits). As a result of this drive, new scientific technologies and processes have been used to quickly create novel, and in some cases, controllable seeds (refer to the 'Terminator Technology' article). These genetically modified products are now in everything from the clothes that we wear (cotton) to the food that we eat.

Since our society has moved so far away from its agrarian roots, educating people is critically important. If we do not fundamentally understand agricultural processes, we can only superficially grasp the gravity of the threats to our food supply. It must be understood that diversity of available plant varieties is important to all of us. We must ensure that a repeat of

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the "Irish Potato Famine" never again happens.

Ultimately, it is about choices. We must support grass-root efforts at passing laws requiring the labeling of food that contains genetically modified ingredients. The pro-biotechnology corporations are well funded and well connected within government. They have been very effective at getting society to accept their products.

Additionally, we must choose to preserve old seed varieties for future generations to enjoy. In response to the degradation of our biodiversity, many organizations and small alternative seed companies have answered the call to help fight this erosion and have pledged to not knowingly sell genetically modified organisms. The Victory Seed Company is an early signor of this pledge.

Our mission as an organization is to educate people about seed saving practices, organic gardening principles, and the importance of preserving old plant varieties. Additionally, we intend to create and maintain a seed bank, coordinate a network of committed growers to aid in maintaining the viability of the collection in the seed bank, and commercially offering these seeds to ultimately ensure their preservation.

Although much has been forever lost, it is never too late to start saving what we still have. There are many ways that each person can work towards this goal. You can start by supporting the work of the Victory Seed Company and other like-minded organizations. By gardening with open-pollinated, heirloom seeds, you can connect with our past and continue a process as ancient as our oldest recorded history. Ultimately, this act works towards saving something fragile for future generations.

http://www.victoryseeds.com/information/case_for_heirlooms.html

Great Eats

RHUBARB COMPOTE www.epicurious.com

I often make a thick crème anglaise to serve with this compote, though it is delightful all on its own.

6 pounds of rhubarb, peeled, diced

1/4 cup water
2 cups sugar

Place the rhubarb and the water in a heavy-bottomed stockpot over medium-high heat. Bring the water to a boil, stir, cover the pot and cook until the rhubarb is beginning to soften and give up its liquid, about 10 minutes. Stir in the sugar, cover partially and continue cooking until the rhubarb is completely melted and soft, checking it from time to time to be sure it isn't sticking to the bottom of the pan, about 40 minutes. Remove the compote from the heat and let cool before serving.

Makes 8 to 10 servings.

CUCUMBER SALAD WITH PINEAPPLE AND JALAPENO www.epicurious.com

Serve this salad as a fiery first course for an Asian-style entrée such as a stir-fry, or use it as a side dish for grilled chicken or fish.

3/4 cup sugar
2/3 cup white vinegar
2 tablespoons water
1/2 teaspoon salt

1 cup 1/3-inch pieces peeled cored fresh pineapple
1 English hothouse cucumber, cut into 1/3-inch pieces
1 carrot, peeled, cut into matchstick-size strips
1/3 cup thinly sliced red onion
1 tablespoon minced seeded jalapeño chili
1 head green leaf lettuce, leaves separated



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rated
1 tablespoon sesame seeds, toasted

Bring first 4 ingredients to boil in heavy small saucepan, stirring until sugar dissolves. Simmer until reduced to 2/3 cup, about 4 minutes. Transfer syrup to large bowl and refrigerate until cold.

Add pineapple to syrup. Cover and refrigerate 1 hour. Add cucumber and next 3 ingredients to pineapple mixture; stir to coat. Line plates with lettuce leaves. Spoon salad atop lettuce. Sprinkle with sesame seeds and serve.

Classifieds

Roommate wanted to share spacious vintage 2BR condo in Rogers Park. Near Red Line, Metra and 5 blocks to lake. No pets (two cats already live here). Available July 1 but start date negotiable. \$500/month including utilities. Call 773-274-5709.

Thanks.. from your favorite Newleaf Grocers - Sarah, Steve, and Audra.

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Available Tu, We, Sa
after 2:30pm

Mixed Fruits and Veggies

Single.....\$13...feeds 1-2
Double...\$23...feeds 2-4
Triple.....\$30...feeds 4-6

Fruit Only Bags

Whole.....\$23...feeds 2-4
Half.....\$13...feeds 1-2

Greens Only Bag

Greens....\$13....feeds 1-2

M 8-7 Tu-We 8-7:30 Th-Fr 8-7 Sa 9 -7:30 Su 11-6