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### Heirloom Plants

Many people think of heirlooms as jewelry and furniture passed down from generation to generation. You may even have a ring or necklace that was given to your mother by your grandmother. But what if you could eat your family heirloom? That's right, a family heirloom could be found on your dinner plate.

Growing heirloom plants has become progressively more popular for a variety of reasons. Some may have an historical interest in plants passed down from generations, and others may have a simple curiosity of what the different varieties may taste like. For even others, the motivation is driven by the fact that biodiversity is shrinking from the industrialization of agriculture. Whatever the motive may be for taking an interest in heirloom plants, the truth is that many varieties of fruits and vegetables are becoming increasingly more rare, and if nothing is done to help the consequences could be dire.

These heirloom plants have become genetically unique, and they have evolved to resist many diseases and pests. By losing diversity among plants, it becomes easier for a pest or disease to wipe out a population. Unfortunately the industry of agriculture prefers to produce only a few varieties of plants. By only using certain varieties, they are able to mass produce the plants for consumers. In the past, this uniformity has created some of the biggest agricultural catastrophes. For example, the potato famine in Ireland was solely caused from only growing one variety of potato. Fortunately, organizations have been created to spread awareness about the significance heirloom varieties have on our lives.

Seed Savers Exchange, an organization dedicated to saving and sharing heirloom seeds, defines an heirloom as any garden plant that has a history of being passed down within a family. Some of these heirloom varieties are decades, or even centuries old. It's incredible to see how many different varieties are present among plants. For example, Seed Savers Exchange has found about 700 varieties of apples; however, that number is quite small compared to the 8,000 varieties that were found before the 1900's. Seed Savers is trying very hard to prevent the remaining 700 from becoming extinct as well. Not only can you find out more information from Seed Savers Exchange, but you may also purchase rare seeds from them to start your own genetically diverse garden. The Pros to starting your own heirloom garden are overwhelming. Aside from the money that it could save, growing diverse vegetables and fruits can help reverse the effects that industrial agriculture has put on the environment.

The monoculture created by the agriculture industry relies on heavy applications of pesticides and fertilizer. By growing regional varieties, there is a lower chance of disease and pests invading the crop, because variety that has adapted to its region through evolution will be resistant. Did you know that an apple variety called "Wolf River" originated in Wisconsin around the 1860's? The average Wolf River apple weighs around 1 pound and is about the size of a grapefruit; however you probably won't see this kind of apple in any supermarket. According to the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), just 12 crops and five animal species now provide more than 70 percent of human food, and three-quarters of the variety of agricultural plants have been lost over the last century. If a population of crops were to be lost due to a disease, the results could be devastating

Surprisingly, some of the best tasting apple varieties are not found in supermarkets for consumer enjoyment. A limited amount of apple variety is made available to everyday

consumers. This is because many tasty apple varieties do not hold up well in shipping.

According to Barb and Jim Lindemann, two apple farmers from McFarland, Wisconsin, “apples just don’t taste the same as when we were kids”. Because companies want apples that can be easily mass produced and shipped to grocery stores, they do not bother to make more varieties available to the public.

Luckily, not everyone buys their apples from the “big-box” supermarkets. A study featured in the Slow Food USA “Forgotten Fruits Manual and Manifesto”, says that venues such as farmers markets and CSAs are keeping at least 17 more apple varieties in the marketplace. This may be due to the fact that many organic apple farmers have worked hard to include heirloom apples in their orchards. Here in the Madison, Wisconsin area, you can find farms that dedicate their time to make rare, heirloom fruits and vegetables available. CSA Farms such as Gardens of Goodness, owned by Barb and Jim Lindemann, allow consumers to taste the uniqueness of every apple variety they offer, which happens to be forty varieties.

Although the extinction of many varieties over the past century is unfortunate, the fact that people see the problem and want to stop it, shows that we are moving in the right direction. Organizations like Seed Savers are doing their part to see to it that heirloom varieties do not disappear. As the old varieties are preserved, new ones are allowed to evolve. Although I do see the need for some mass production of crops, I also believe that nature’s food should be as diverse as the people who consume it! If after reading this, you want to know more about heirloom varieties of plants, visit [SeedSavers.org](http://SeedSavers.org), or join a CSA farm so you can taste the diverseness firsthand.

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[www.FAO.org](http://www.FAO.org), 4-28-09

[www.SeedSavers.org](http://www.SeedSavers.org), 4-29-09

[www.SlowfoodUSA.org](http://www.SlowfoodUSA.org), 4-29-09