



**Top:** Heirloom vegetables are a feast for the eyes as well as the palate. **Above:** Seed grower Mike Dunton relishes his link with history. **Right:** Gardeners eagerly share favorite seeds to keep heirloom varieties alive.

The exchanges highlight the special mission shared by heirloom growers large and small: prorogating and sharing seed.

**Variety survival.** In fact, without sharing, harvesting and replanting seed, heirloom varieties are doomed to fade like old memories.

“Some of these seeds might be frozen in a seed bank somewhere, but if people aren’t growing them, they won’t survive,” warns Whealy. “You need to get them growing, to keep them adapted to your climate and pests.

You’re really helping preserve these varieties.”

Tomatoes and beans offer a great introduction to heirlooms, says Dunton. They’re hardy, and seed collection is easy.

**Summer-long.** Unlike new hybrids, older varieties tend to yield for weeks, Dunton notes. That’s tough on commercial producers who want to cut labor costs with a single harvest, but it’s great news for gardeners who want fruit all summer. And what fruit!

“There’s a whole spectrum of flavors, from super-sweet to very complex,” Dunton says, describing the mania for heirloom tomatoes. “It’s kind of like wine lovers—people start matching flavors to different salads.” ■

## Where to find heirloom seeds

**Abundant Life Seed Foundation**, P.O. Box 772, Pt. Townsend, WA 98368, [www.abundantlifeseed.org](http://www.abundantlifeseed.org).  
**Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds**, P.O. Box 70, Mansfield, MO 65704, [www.rareseeds.com](http://www.rareseeds.com).  
**The Cottage Gardener**, 4199 Gilmore Road, RR1 Newtonville, ON L0A 1J0, Canada, [www.cottagegardener.com](http://www.cottagegardener.com).

**Seed Savers Exchange**, 3076 North Winn Road, Decorah, IA 52101, [www.seedsavers.org](http://www.seedsavers.org).  
**Seeds of Change**, 1 Sunset Way, Henderson, NV 89015, [www.seedsofchange.com](http://www.seedsofchange.com).

**Victory Seed Co.**, P.O. Box 192, Molalla, OR 97038, [www.victoryseeds.com](http://www.victoryseeds.com)

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 —Diane Whealy

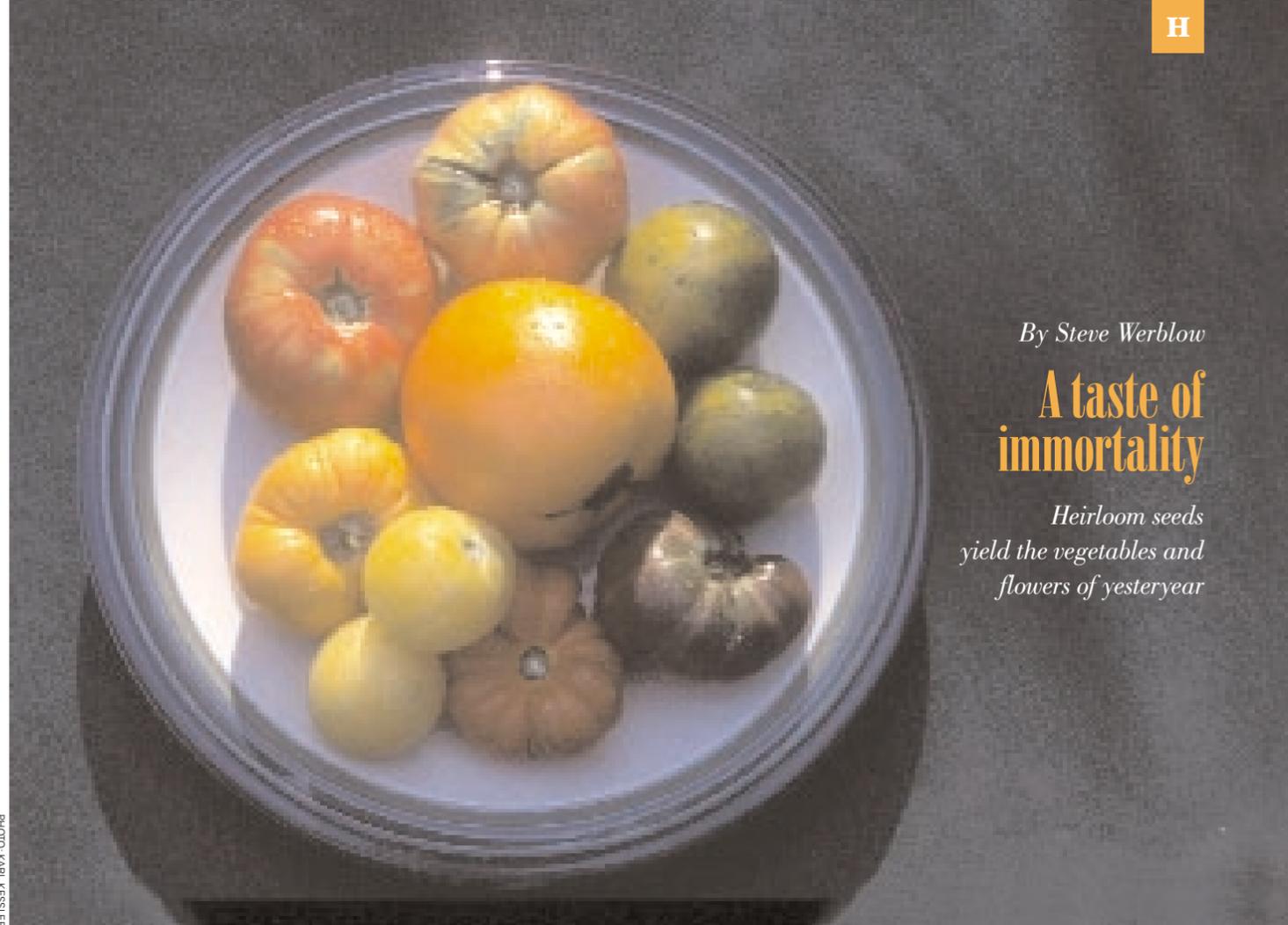


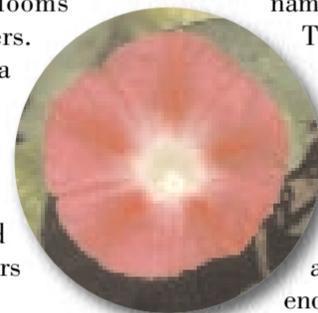
PHOTO: KARL KESSLER

By Steve Werblow

## A taste of immortality

Heirloom seeds yield the vegetables and flowers of yesteryear

History is alive in the garden of Mike and Denise Dunton. Its scent hangs in the air behind the house Mike’s great-grandfather built near Molalla, Ore., home of some of the pioneering families of the Oregon Trail. And it bursts from the ground and hangs from the trellises in the shapes of antique varieties of vegetables and flowers handed down as heirlooms through generations of gardeners. In 1998, after Mike spent a decade commuting to high-tech jobs around Portland, Ore., the Duntons’ passion for heirloom vegetables and flowers finally blossomed into Victory Seed Company, which offers gardeners a very real taste of history.



**History lesson.** “In genealogy, you study dates and names and places—it’s like a skeleton,” says Mike, an ardent history buff. “Historical events flesh it out. And tasting the food they tasted—it’s like putting the skin on. It adds a whole new layer.”

Heirloom seed catalogs offer history lessons with variety names like Hamburg rooted parsley or the Glory of Enkhuizen, a Dutch cabbage of the 1700s. They’re also traces of a thousand family trees, memories of Aunt Ruby’s German Green tomatoes, Valenta beans or Grandpa Ott’s morningglory.

**Exchange thrives.** These aren’t just cute names from a marketing department.

There actually was a Grandpa Ott, and it was a love of the iridescent morningglories carried from Bavaria to his Iowa homestead that inspired descendant Diane Whealy and her husband Kent to harvest seeds from his vines and share them with friends. Their endeavor grew into Seed Savers Exchange, which boasts 8,000 members who buy, sell, and trade heirloom vegetables. More than 300 flower lovers participate in the Flower and Herb Exchange, which the Whealys run on the same model as Seed Savers. And thousands of non-members buy from their exchange catalogs and web sites.



**Top:** These heirloom tomatoes offer color, flavor and diversity unmatched by modern varieties. **Above:** Denise Dunton’s family brought Valenta beans from Italy. **Left:** Crimson Ramblers have brightened homesteads for generations.