

Heirloom Vegetables for Montana Gardens

by Cheryl Moore-Gough, MSU Extension Horticulturist, and Robert E. Gough, MSU Professor of Horticulture

Following is a selection of heirloom vegetable cultivars that might do well in Montana gardens. Try some of these and see what is right for you, but be sure to isolate when you plant, and save the seeds for next year (see *Harvesting and Saving Garden Seeds*, MT199217AG).

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Did vegetables really taste better in the “good old days”?

Is a ‘Brandywine’ tomato that much better than an ‘Early Girl’? It depends, of course, on how you define “better” and “superior” and it depends upon individual tastes. Gardeners today are excited about raising “heirloom” vegetables, even though they generally have poor pest resistance compared to modern hybrids. There is a certain charm about being able to experience flavors and textures our forefathers experienced. It is a gardener’s way of touching a long gone era.

The names are romantic and colorful. ‘Lazy Housewife’, also known as ‘White Cranberry’ pole bean, was brought to America by German immigrants about the time of the Civil War. The bean is stringless and very productive and its name implies that even a lazy housewife had time to prepare it for dinner.

In past times, most vegetables were “open pollinated,” meaning that they crossed readily among themselves. There were no “man-made” hybrids, so seeds taken from fruit and planted the following year came “true”, or nearly so; that is, they reproduced nearly identical to the parent. For example, if you planted seed from ‘Country Gentleman’ sweet corn or ‘Bloomsdale Long Standing’ spinach, both pollinated by wind, you got ‘Country Gentleman’ or ‘Bloomsdale Long Standing’ again, so long as there were no other corn or spinach cultivars within a mile or so. Other open-pollinated vegetables, like the crucifers, radish, carrots, endive, leeks and onions, parsley, rutabaga and parsnip, are pollinated by insects and need only about 200 yards of isolation from other cultivars. And best of all, peas, beans, lettuce and tomatoes are self-pollinated and should need no isolation whatsoever. It’s easy to save their seeds for next season and you can

plant more than one cultivar in the garden without fear of “contamination”. Plant them at opposite ends of the garden though, just to be sure. What is now the standard practice of purchasing all seeds only began in earnest after World War II. Until that time, and for about 20 years after, many gardeners saved the seeds from their best open-pollinated plants to plant year after year.

During the 1950s and 60s, hybrid crops that were generally more vigorous and pest resistant and produced pretty, uniform fruit became mainstream. But seed saved from ‘Bodaceous’ F₁ hybrid sweet corn and planted the following year will not produce ‘Bodaceous’ sweet corn, as the corn genes segregate in the second generation. As the old cultivars disappeared, we lost something less tangible. Perhaps we miss the imperfections (and colorful names) of ‘Bull’s Blood’ beet, ‘Rhode Island Asylum’ sweet corn, and ‘Cow’s Horn’ carrots. They came from a simpler time; they had character.

In the 1970s, reactionary gardeners rejected the “perfect” hybrids and began to turn back to the heirloom cultivars to rediscover the trials and tribulations of gardening a century or more ago. “Heirloom” is difficult to define and means different things to different people, but in general, an heirloom cultivar is one that first appeared more than 50 years ago and often has an interesting history. But heirlooms have their downsides. Many are adapted only locally. What grows well in Maryland may not perform at all in Malta, Montana. Many need a long season to mature or require too much space for today’s gardens. As mentioned above, most have poor pest resistance, and all the blemishes that come from a wilder, more romantic era. Nevertheless, by careful choice you can find an heirloom that is right for you.

Following is a small sample of heirloom vegetables that should do well in Montana gardens.

| Vegetable | Cultivar | Season (days) | Year Introduced & Origin | Notes |
|---|--|---------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Bean <i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i> | Burpee's Stringless Green Pod | 50 – 55 | 1894 (NY) | Heat and drought tolerant. Claimed to be the only stringless green-podded bush bean. |
| | Lazy Wife (White Cranberry) | 75 – 80 | 1810 (PA) | Claimed to be the first stringless pole snap bean. Several stories circulate regarding the source of the name. |
| | Kentucky Wonder (Old Homestead) | 58 – 72 | 1850s (KY) | Originally sold in 1864 as 'Texas Pole'; reintroduced in 1877 as 'Kentucky Wonder'. Very popular and widely adapted pole bean. |
| | Black Valentine | 48 – 70 | Before 1850 | 6" pods have shiny black seeds. Snap bean when young; shell when mature. |
| | Scarlet Runner | 65 – 90 | 1600s (South America) | One of the oldest runner beans still planted. Use for snap or shell. |
| | Beet <i>Beta vulgaris</i> Crassa | Bull's Blood | 35 | 1800s (Netherlands) |
| | Chioggia | 55 | 1840s (Italy) | Pretty candy stripe rings are retained if baked whole and sliced just before serving. |
| | Detroit Dark Red | 55 – 60 | 1892 (United States) | The beet standard; good for table or canning; tasty greens. |
| | Early Wonder | 50 – 60 | 1911 (United States) | Best of the earliest beet roots. Also good for greens. |
| | Golden Beet | 55 – 60 | Before 1828 | Orange roots turn golden when cooked. Tasty tops. Low germination. |
| Broccoli <i>Brassica oleracea</i> Italica | Calabrese | 60 – 90 | 1880s (Italy) | 8" head. Multiple side shoots follow main harvest. Freezes well. |
| | DeCicco | 48 – 85 | 1890 (Italy) | 4" head. Multiple side shoots follow main harvest. Long harvest period. |
| Brussels sprouts <i>Brassica oleracea</i> Gemmifera | Long Island Improved | 85 – 115 | 1890s | Semi-dwarf. Main commercial cultivar before advent of hybrids. |
| | Early Jersey Wakefield | 60 – 75 | 1840 (England) | Very early conical heads. Small plants may be planted closely. |
| Cabbage <i>Brassica oleracea</i> Capitata | Danish Ballhead | 85 – 110 | 15th Century (Denmark) | Bolt and split resistant. Does well in cool seasons. |
| | Chantenay Red Cored | 60 – 75 | Late 1800s (Europe) | Good for heavy soils. Sweetens in storage. Roots 5" – 7" long. |
| Carrot <i>Daucus carota</i> var. <i>sativa</i> | Danvers Half Long | 65 – 87 | 1871 (MA) | Stores well. |
| | Imperator | 70 – 75 | 1928 (US) | AAS selection ³ . 8" to 9" long roots require loose soil. |
| | Oxheart (Guernade) | 70 – 80 | 1884 (France) | Short thick roots. Stores well. Good for heavy soil. |
| | Early Snowball | 60 – 85 | 1888 | 6 – 7" heads. Small plants mature over 2-3 weeks. |
| Cauliflower <i>Brassica oleracea</i> Botrytis | Country Gentleman (Shoe Peg) | 88 – 100 | 1890 (CT) | White corn with deep, small 'shoe peg' (non-rowed) kernels. |
| | Stowell's Evergreen | 80 – 100 | 1849 (NJ) | Once a leading white cultivar for home and market growers. |
| | Golden Bantam | 70 – 85 | 1902 (MA) | One of the first yellow sweet corns considered suitable for human use. Remains the standard for open-pollinated sweet corn. |
| Cucumber <i>Cucumis sativus</i> | Lemon | 58 – 70 | 1894 (Australia) | Slicing. Looks like a lemon and is a great kid pleaser. |
| | Japanese Climbing | 58 – 65 | 1892 (Japan) | Slicing. Best for trellises, wire netting or fences. |
| | Straight 8 | 52 – 75 | 1935 (United States) | AAS selection. Mosaic resistant. 8" – 9" fruit. |
| | Chesnok Red (Shvelisi) | Sept. to Aug. | (Georgia Republic) ¹ | 8 to 12 cloves per bulb; purple striped. Hardneck. |
| Garlic <i>Allium sativum</i> | Inchelium Red | Sept. to Aug. | (WA) ¹ | Large bulbs with 8 to 20 cloves. Artichoke type. Softneck. |
| | Spanish Roja | Sept. to Aug. | Before 1900 | 6 to 13 cloves per bulb. Rocambole type. Hardneck. |

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| Kale <i>Brassica oleracea</i> Acephala | Red Russian (Buda Kale, Ragged Jack) | 50 – 60 | 1863 (Russia) | Brought to Canada by Russian traders. Leaves with red veins. Hardy to -10°F and may overwinter. |
| Kohlrabi <i>Brassica oleracea</i> Gongylodes | Lacinato (Tuscan Black Palm) | 62 | 1885 (Italy) | Primitive, open growth habit; leaves heavily savoyed (puckered). Heat and cold tolerant. |
| Leek <i>Allium ampeloprasum</i> var. porrum | Early White Vienna | 55 – 60 | Before 1860 (Austria) | Pale green globes. Developed in Austria in the 1840s and introduced into the U.S. in the 1860s. |
| Lettuce <i>Lactuca sativa</i> | Early Purple Vienna | 55 – 60 | Before 1860 | Attractive purple globes. |
| | Blue Solaise (Bleu de Solaise) | 105 | (France) ¹ | Very ornamental, turning violet after a hard frost. Very hardy and good for short seasons. |
| | Giant Musselburgh | 80 – 150 | 1870 (Scotland) | Hardy and mild. |
| | Black Seeded Simpson | 50 – 55 | 1850 | Also known as 'First Early', 'Earliest Cutting', 'Carters Long Standing' and 'Long-streaths Earliest'. Widely adapted. |
| | Green Oakleaf | 50 | 1774, possibly 1686 | Also known as 'Baltimore' or 'Philadelphia Oakleaf'. |
| | Red Deer Tongue | 60 – 65 | 1740s | There is also a green cultivar. Grown in most pioneer gardens. |
| | Tennis Ball | 50 | Before 1804 | 7" diameter loose heads. Grown by Thomas Jefferson. |
| | Tom Thumb | 50 – 55 | 1830 (England) | Small butterhead is perfect for small home gardens. |
| | Forellenschuss (Trout Back) | 55 – 65 | 1793 ² | Many spotted cultivars have confused backgrounds. |
| Melons <i>Cucumis melo</i> | Emerald Gem | 70 – 90 | 1886 (United States) | The most popular melon in the late 19th century. |
| | Jenny Lind | 70 – 85 | Before 1846 (Armenia) ² | Early maturing and good for northern gardens. Short, disease resistant plants. |
| Onion <i>Allium cepa</i> | Ailsa Craig | 100 | 1887 (England) ² | Best for fresh use. Yellow-skinned. |
| | Yellow Ebenezer | 100 | 1906 (Japan) | Early maturing. Good for northern gardens. |
| <i>Allium fistulosum</i> | Evergreen White Bunching | 60 – 80 | 1880s | Grown for green onions as they do not form bulbs. Hardy. |
| Parsnip <i>Pastinaca sativa</i> | Hollow Crown | 95 – 135 | Before 1852 | Still a widely-grown commercial cultivar. |
| Pea <i>Pisum sativum</i> | Dwarf Gray Sugar | 60 – 75 | Before 1773 | Edible pod. Stringless and fiberless. Does not require staking. |
| | Thomas Laxton | 55 – 65 | 1898 | Shell pea named for a famous pea breeder. Good for freezing. |
| Pepper <i>Capsicum annuum</i> | Jimmy Nardello's Sweet Italian Frying Pepper (Nardello) | 80 – 90 | 1887 (Italy) | Stake to support heavy fruit load. Pungent green fruits ripen to a sweet red. Good for frying or for tomato sauce. |
| Potato <i>Solanum tuberosum</i> | Irish Cobbler | 90 | Before 1876 (NJ) | Selected from a seed ball of 'Early Rose' by an Irish shoemaker. |
| | Russet Burbank (Netted Gem) | 80-90 | 1874 (CA) | Also selected from a seed ball of 'Early Rose'. NOTE: Always purchase certified disease free seed to protect Montana's potato industry. Never plant table stock. |

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| Pumpkin and Squash <i>Cucurbita</i> spp. | Table Queen | 59 – 90 | 1913 (US) | | Believed to have been developed from a strain grown by the Arikara tribe. Vines are 6 – 8' long. Acorn type winter squash. |
| | Delicata | 80 – 100 | 1894 (US) | | Uncommon since the 1920s, it has recently reappeared in seed catalogs. Winter squash. |
| | Early Yellow Summer Crookneck | 50 – 55 | About 1700 (US) | | Easy to grow bush summer squash. |
| | Fordhook Acorn | 56 – 85 | 1890 (US) | | Burpee isolated this from the Mandan-Arikara squash. Vining plant. |
| | White Bush Scallop (Patty Pan) | 45 – 55 | Before 1722 (US) | | White and yellow bush scallop of Native American origin. |
| | Small Sugar | 80 – 110 | Before 1860 (US) | | Small pumpkin fruit about 6" in diameter; very good for pies. |
| | French Breakfast | 30 | 1879 | | Red with a white tip. Blunt, oblong shape. |
| | White Icicle (Lady Finger, White Naples, White Italian) | 27 – 32 | Before 1865 | | Long white carrot-shaped roots. |
| | Bloomsdale Long Standing | 39 – 60 | 1925 (United States) | | Leaves are dark and glossy, crumpled, twisted and savoyed. Heavy yielding, slow bolting. |
| | New Zealand | 50 – 70 | 1770 (New Zealand) | | Not a true spinach but used as spinach. Large spreading plants. |
| Swiss Chard <i>Beta vulgaris</i> Cicia | Five Color Silver Beet (Rainbow Chard) | 50 – 60 | (Australia) ¹ | | Variable midrib colors. Tasty mild foliage. Vigorous grower. |
| | Fordhook Giant | 50 – 60 | About 1750 | | Very vigorous white stalks. |
| | Rhubarb Chard | 50 – 60 | 1857 (Europe) | | Also known as Ruby Chard. Pretty deep red, juicy stalks. |
| | Brandywine | 90 | 1885 | | Large pink beefsteak fruit are arguably one of the best tasting available. Indeterminate vines. May be too late for most Montana gardens. |
| Tomato <i>Lycopersicon esculentum</i> | Cherokee Purple | 80 | Before 1890 (TN) | | Dark green shoulders and brownish purple skin. Flavor rivals 'Brandywine'. Indeterminate vines. |
| | Riesentraube | 75 – 80 | Before 1847 | | Grown by Pennsylvania Dutch, the name translates as "giant bunches of grapes." 1" diameter fruits. Indeterminate vines. |
| | Trophy | 80 | 1870 (MD) | | Slicing. Indeterminate vines. |
| Turnip <i>Brassica rapa</i> | Purple Top White Globe | 45 – 65 | Before 1880 | | Stores well. Best for eating when 3 – 4" in diameter. The standard for garden turnips. |

¹ Date uncertain ² Origin uncertain ³ All America selection

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