

Heirloom Gardening Guide

Planting to Save Money

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Explanation of GMO, Hybrid, and Heirloom Seeds.....	6
Heirloom Seed Sources.....	11
Money Saving Evaluation.....	13
Pest Control.....	18
Container Planting.....	21
Companion Planting.....	24
Seed Saving-Self and Open-pollination.....	25
Preserving the Harvest	
Freezer.....	29
Canning.....	32
Root Cellar.....	34
Conclusion.....	35
Worksheet.....	37
About the Author.....	38

Introduction

My family has been growing our vegetables since the day I was born. Spring was running barefoot through freshly tilled dirt and poking fingers into sun warmed soil. Before I was old enough to judge how to deep to make each hole for the seeds, I would follow behind my mother, carefully and proudly dropping a seed into its well.

I crouched beside her after each seed sprouted and learned which green leaves were weeds and which were our vegetables. A sense of satisfaction filled me when “my plants” grew tall and started to bear their fruit.

The ping of beans being snapped into a bowl and the hissing of a pressure cooker canner was the rhythm of summer and fall. Blackberries stained fingers and mouths, but never earned a scowl, even if they were eaten right before dinner.

Every year, my father would collect the remaining beans and shell them out for the seed for next year's garden. I had no idea what the terms heirloom or organic meant and neither did my parents. They were merely carrying on the tradition of surviving and living off the land their folks had taught them. A tradition that hales from the hollers and gaps of North Carolina and the name of our family's strain of beans, Tarheel green pole beans.

Heirloom seeds are a tradition, a heritage, connecting us to our ancestors. They are plants that come to us in their natural state, straight from the hand of God. When I'm gardening, I'm reminded of so many parables in the Bible. It was no coincidence that we started out in the Garden of Eden and our souls recognize that when we're tending the soil.

Explanation of GMO, Hybrid, and Heirloom

Heirloom seeds are regaining popularity among gardeners and modern homesteaders. This brings new meaning to the saying, everything old becomes new again. When discussing seeds and plants you'll hear reference to three kinds of seeds, GMO (genetically modified organisms), hybrids, and heirlooms.

Genetically modified seeds (GMO's) are injected with DNA from completely unrelated species. This means they can and are injected with animal cells, viruses, and bacteria. GMO plants can be sprayed with pesticides and because of their altered DNA, they won't be killed. Instead, they absorb the pesticides and then we ingest the chemicals. Large scale farmers use them to save themselves money. It's much easier and cheaper to spray an entire field than to weed it or walk through and only spray the weeds.

However, the bugs that eat these plants are being harmed as well as the animals that ingest them. Farmers are seeing piglets dying and disease running through their herds when they're fed GMO feed. The soil is also being ruined. And what weeds do survive are then becoming immune to the chemical and pesticides used to drench the GMO plants and the dirt they are in.

Hybrid seeds aren't genetically modified, they are created by scientists paring together two kinds of plants from the same species hoping the new strain will have the best traits of the two separate strains. They gained popularity when farmers were trying to meet the worlds increased demand for food.

The problem is hybrid seeds are unstable. You can't save the seed and replant them the next year and get the same plant. Other traits will manifest (usually undesirable) if the plant grows at all. So you have to buy new seed every year, though they're not harmful like GMO's are. Another factor of hybrid seeds is many don't have the complex flavor of heirloom plants.

Heirloom plants naturally evolve over time due to pollination and farmers saving the seed from the best plants each year. This process is due to wind and insects, the acts of God and nature. Hybrids are when a scientist cross-pollinates two plants by hand to try and capitalize on the best features of both plants. Not the case with heirloom.

Most commercial farmers want produce that looks pretty. After all, most shoppers will buy the bright red tomato over a striped one based on looks, not taste. They select traits for the best profit. The heirloom farmer selects traits for the best taste and durability for his area and preferences.

Buying seed every year can be expensive. By purchasing and growing heirloom seed you can save the seed to replant the following year. Properly dried and stored seed is good for years. I have neighbors who found ten-year-old seed and planted it without a problem. We try to use ours within three years, rotating each year's seeds.

Another factor of heirloom seed is you can naturally select the best plants to save your seed from. This ensures you'll have a strain of vegetables with the best size, color, and taste to your preferences.

Because gardening should be about what you like to grow and eat. Gardening is a personal experience and should be tailored to you.

The very act of buying and raising heirloom plants will save you money in comparison to purchasing all of your vegetables and fruits at the store. If you save the seed, you're upping your savings.

However, some people just like the flavor, color, [history](#), and different varieties among heirloom seeds and don't want to save the seed. This is fine. I still purchase some of my heirloom seed from trusted companies. Please don't feel like you have to save the seed or you're not a true gardener.

Gardening is work, though I consider it rewarding and well worth the effort. I applaud you for wanting to grow your own

food. If seed saving overwhelms you and isn't something you feel you can fit into your schedule, don't feel bad about it.

Raising your own food and preserving some of the harvest is saving you money.

But if you want to save the seed, heirloom plants provide you with that option.

Now you know the benefits of heirloom seed, but how do you get them?

Sources for Heirloom Seeds

There are many companies that now sell heirloom seed. You'll find heirloom seed in almost any seed company catalog or website, Territorial and Burpee both have heirloom seeds in their product line and have a good reputation. However, the best source I've found in selection and price is Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds at www.rareseeds.com (No, I'm not an affiliate and get nothing from recommending them) Request their catalog for free at their website. But be warned, you'll spend hours drooling over their catalog. It has gardening tips, articles, and recipes, besides the largest selection of heirloom seeds I've found.

There are many seed saving exchanges on line. I'm not a member of any, but you may conduct your own searches or ask fellow gardeners for referrals in your area.

A second way to find heirloom seed is to ask other gardeners. My family has been saving and cultivating a strain of Tarheel green pole beans for over a hundred years. I do an annual giveaway of this seed on my blog every year in March. You can subscribe to my blog for free at www.melissaknorris.com

Ask some of your gardening friends or neighbors if they practice heirloom gardening. If they say yes, you can ask where they purchase their seeds or if you can buy some from them. Most will probably offer you a few seeds, but to be on the safe side, it's better to ask if you can purchase and then be thankful if they're just given to you instead.

Now you know why and where to get heirloom seeds, but the next question is which seeds and plants are the best for your family and your pocket book.

Money Saving Evaluation

To determine which plants will save you the most money depends on several factors that vary from each person and family. I've developed a set of six questions that will help you come up with a customized gardening plan for your family.

1. What vegetables do you purchase the most of?

It makes sense that by planting what you eat the most of you'll save money by growing it yourself.

2. Is it a prolific producer?

One thing I like to consider when planting my vegetable garden is how much each plant produces. I can get much more harvest off of a single green bean plant than I can a cabbage plant. If you're pressed for space, consider only planting plants that produce a large crop.

3. Can I easily preserve the crop for use throughout the whole year?

One of the best ways to save your money is to preserve part of your crop for consumption later in the year. Lettuce is not easily preserved for all year use. That doesn't mean to not grow it. Lettuce is an easy crop and I love picking fresh greens for a salad, but if your space is limited, I'd consider planting spinach instead. Spinach can be frozen to use in casseroles, soups, and dips.

4. Can I purchase this organically from a local farmer or farmers market inexpensively?

Some items can be purchased in season from a large farmer or farmers market without breaking the bank. In this instance, I'd consider purchasing this plant/vegetable before growing it. I do this with strawberries, tomatoes, and asparagus. We grow our own tomatoes to eat fresh, but living in the Pacific Northwest and without a green house, I have trouble getting enough tomatoes to ripen fully before the first frost for all

the canning I do. I purchase organic heirloom tomatoes from a farmers market to can stewed tomatoes and salsa. (I'll be making my own sauce this year and you can bet I'll share the recipe and tutorial!)

5. Does it have to be started indoors or can it be sown directly into the soil? This is a biggie for me. I don't have a garage or a green house. All of my seed is sown directly into the ground. My growing season is short, in a normal season the soil hasn't reached 60 degrees (which is the temperature most seeds will germinate at) until the last week of May. Our first frost usually falls the end of September. Tomatoes, peppers, and members of the brassica family (cabbage, broccoli, brussel sprout, cauliflower, kale, bok choy, etc.) need to be started indoors for the summer harvest.

Note: Varieties of the brassica family planted in late summer for winter and spring harvest can be sown directly into the soil, as the soil is now warm.

I prefer to purchase starts of organic heirloom varieties from a trusted local nursery of these plants. But if you have the space to start your own at home, by all means do so. This year I plan on starting a few pepper and cauliflower plants indoors, but I'll still purchase tomato starts from the nursery.

6. Does it take up a large amount of space?

If you have a large garden plot, then this won't be such a concern for you. But if space is limited, you'll want to carefully consider which plants to grow. Corn should be planted in blocks, rather than rows, for best pollination and harvest. I don't recommend growing corn if you don't have a lot of space or trying save the seed. Corn will cross pollinate with other corn planted up to 5 miles away and is almost impossible to keep pure. Plus, in order to prevent inbreeding, you need 100 plants if you plan on saving the seed. We do plant corn, but I don't try to save the seed from it.

Cucumbers are a sprawling vine, but can be grown on a trellis or trained up a fence to save on space. Many squashes, especially pumpkins, like to trail out. Read the descriptions in the catalogs or on the packets and try to find compact bush varieties if your space is limited.

Answering the above questions will help give you a guideline for which seeds to buy and plant. (Worksheet at end of the book)

Pest Control

Some of you asked for advice for keeping pesky critters out of your garden. The best most fool proof thing I've found for keeping deer, rabbits, dogs, cattle, and horses out of the garden is to fence it. We used metal t-posts and three foot high metal fencing. Don't use plastic as rabbits can chew through it. Chicken wire would work as well. Be sure to secure it well at the bottom as that's where rabbits will try to enter. I know deer can jump fences, but we've never had any try and jump into ours. Having a dog also helps. We don't have a squirrel problem in the garden, though they are present on our property, so I'm not sure if the fence would deter them, but I know a good mouser (cat) should. Our cat has proudly brought me a tail before.

We've had our fence up for over six years. It's not a huge upfront investment, but divided out over six years and it's very economical and effective. It stays up year round.

Fencing isn't an option for everyone. If you can't or don't want to go the fence route, I've heard people have good results with [Bobbex](#). Bobbex is a natural concentrate to repel animals made from all natural ingredients. You don't have to worry about it harming your children, soil, or plants.

We garden organically and don't use pesticides or chemicals. For broccoli and cabbage we pick off any worms. If you see any moths (which lay the eggs) simply cover your plants with small netting or gardening cloth so they can't get to the plants.

For our blueberries, birds are a huge problem. They stripped my entire crop in one day the first year I had them. Since then, I purchased a large cloth of netting and net my plants when the berries start to ripen. I don't mind sharing a few with the birds (they don't seem to like the raspberries as much and I don't cover them) but I'm not willing to share my entire crop.

Weed control is done by hand and hoe. We leave enough space between our rows to get our rototiller through. Usually, this only requires a couple of passes in the beginning of the summer. You can try layering newspaper (it's printed with soy-ink and garden friendly paper) to keep weeds down. However, this does cause your nitrate level to drop so you'll need to add some nitrate fertilizer back in. Chicken poop (not too hot, must be composted with other material and not fresh) is high in nitrates. Cattle manure is a good source but make sure it's old and dry. I'll go more into this topic on my blog this fall, the time of year when you should introduce most of your fertilizer so it has all winter to decompose and enrich the soil. If you use fresh manure you'll introduce new weeds and burn your plants. Coffee grounds are high in acid, but only use a small amount and make sure it's organic.

Container Planting

Even if you don't have a garden, you can still grow some of your own edibles. A large deck helps, but if you're stuck in a little apartment there is one crop you can grow on your windowsill.

Herbs!

The wonderful thing about herbs is they can be grown indoors year round with very little space. Check out your spice cabinet and determine which herbs you cook with the most. We use a lot of basil, oregano, and rosemary. (Note: Depending on your climate, rosemary can grow yearlong outdoors) I grow mint, lemon balm, and thyme outside year round. I direct sow dill in the spring.

You can purchase starts or grow them from seed. Remember they need lots of light (window sill) and if they're in a small pot, frequent watering.

Start them in winter and by spring you can transplant them outdoors. By the end of summer you can bring a small set back indoors and then harvest the rest.

Another easy container crop is garlic. Garlic does best in well-drained soil, so containers or raised beds work well. It's a great winter crop and easily harvested. Here's [my tutorial on planting garlic](#).

Strawberries and tomatoes do well in containers as well. There are many books on container gardening if you're space is limited.

For large pots, be sure to put to have a sufficient drain hole and line the bottom with rocks for proper drainage. Use soil that hasn't been treated with anything. To protect your deck or porch, I recommend using a plant stand or saucer to catch and hold the extra water.

Young fruit trees will grow quite well in a five to seven gallon container for the first two years. Later transfer to a ten to fifteen gallon container and then to your final orchard spot, this is great if you know you'll be moving to a larger space in the next few

years or just want some fun and functional plants on the deck and patio.

For more on container gardening, check out this list of articles from [Whole Foods on a Budget](#). She uses all containers to grow her food and also recommends Bobbex (where I first learned about the product).

Companion Planting

Now that you have decided which plants you're going to plant (complete chart at the end of this book) you need to map out where you're going to plant them in your garden.

Determine which part of your garden receives the most sunlight. You'll want to plant the tallest plants at the back, so they don't shade the rest of the plants, unless of course you have some shade thriving plants, put those behind taller plants.

Some plants do better when paired next to other plants, and not so well when neighbors with others. Here's a chart link for companion planting.

<http://www.thevegetablegarden.info/companion-plants>

Seed Saving

The difference between self-pollinating and open-pollinating plants

One of the benefits of planting with heirloom seeds is the ability to save your own seed from year to year and become more self-sustainable.

If you're not planting to save seed, just for the flavor and health benefits of heirloom seeds, then you can skip this part.

Seed saving is rewarding, but more work. Here's where we have to talk open-pollination and self-pollinating plants. **Self-pollinating plants do not require insects to pollinate them to produce fruit.** They have a male and female within the blossom and pollinate themselves. This means you don't have to worry about them cross breeding with another variety.

Self-pollinating plants are the easiest and best plants to begin learning how to seed save on. Beans and tomatoes fall into this

category. If you're just beginning your seed saving journey, I recommend saving the seeds from these plants your first year so you're not overwhelmed.

To save bean seed, leave some of the pods on the vine until the pods have become shriveled and dried. I leave my seed beans on until the end of the season. Before the first frost, pick the pods and shell out the beans. If you've had a good dry summer and early fall, they'll most likely be partially dried already.

I live in the rainy Pacific Northwest, so it's always a gamble. If it's really wet out, I bring mine in early so they don't mold.

After shelling out your beans, place a paper towel on a rimmed baking sheet. Lay your beans out in a single layer, making sure they aren't touching one another. Allow them to dry for at least three to four weeks in a dry dark spot (the panty shelves work great). Check for mold on any of the seeds every week and throw these out.

I've had to leave some seeds out for up to three months, but this will depend on your climate. You know the seeds are ready to be

bagged for next year's planting when they have shriveled up and you can't penetrate or scratch the surface with your finger nail.

Keep them cool and dry for the rest of the year. Be sure to mark the seed with the name of the plant and year. They are still viable for three to four years, but be sure to rotate your seed stock. Use the oldest first.

Some folk swear by storing them in the freezer. Either way is fine. Before planting beans, soak them in water the night before planting to jump start the germination process.

Open-pollinating plants grow true from the seed and will produce off spring exactly like the parent plant-they're not hybrid. **Open-pollinating plants will cross-pollinate with other varieties within their species.** For example, if you plant two types of cucumbers, they'll cross pollinate. The first year's cucumbers won't show any difference, but if you save the seed from the cross pollinated cucumber, you may get a different kind of cucumber next year.

If you don't care about preserving the exact strain of cucumber or plant, then this is fine. Many people develop their "own" variety of cucumbers, squash, etc. Some like the new cross better.

If you're not saving the seed for replanting, then you have no worries about your varieties cross-pollinating. However, if you want to save the seed and keep your varieties pure, then you need to learn the art of hand-pollinating.

Hand-pollinating is a way to ensure that the plant is only pollinated by the exact same variety and won't mix.

I'll be having several blog posts on this as well throughout the growing season, but it's too in depth to try and cover in a guide.

Planting for Preserving

One of the best ways to save money with your heirloom garden is by preserving your harvest. We eat fresh vegetables and fruit all season long from our garden. The plants listed below are the ones we preserve. By preserving our harvest, we're able to eat quite a bit of it all year long as well. I'm going to share what I plant and how I preserve it with you.

Freezable Crops

A lot of crops both freeze and can well. We also raise our own natural grass fed beef so my freezer is usually full of meat. So if it can be canned, I can it rather than freezing. But, some vegetables become too mushy when canned and these I freeze. Here's my list.

Spinach-eat it fresh and freeze the rest.

Zucchini-I love this summer squash. It is very prolific and can be used in a variety of ways. We eat it fresh, bake with it, and freeze it. It's good raw dipped in your favorite sauce or dip of choice, stir-fried, in soups and sauces (I like to sneak veggies into spaghetti), and a great addition into breads. Here's my recipe for [Zucchini Blueberry Muffins](#) and my [Double Chocolate Fudge Zucchini bread and freezing tutorial](#). Our favorite way to eat it is fresh. Pick when it's young and small. Slice it vertically in half or quarters (depending on size) and brush with olive oil (this is great with [my garlic herb oil blend](#)), season with salt and pepper. Grill until tender and serve warm. My husband likes to dip it in ranch.

Butternut squash-this is ready in the early fall and I anxiously wait for it each year. I bake it fresh and freeze some as well. If you have a root cellar or cool garage it will keep for a few months stored in a dry dark place. Here's my [baked garlic and herb squash recipe and freezing tutorial](#) (you have to steam it before you freeze it and I explain why on the tutorial)

Blueberries and raspberries-fresh, baked in goodies, canned into jellies and jams, frozen for yearlong baking, smoothies, and munching. **Freezing tip**-Rinse and allow to dry in a single layer. Place directly into freezer container, as long as they are dry, there's no need to spread out and freeze on a tray. I've never had a problem with them sticking together. Occasionally a few will clump, but I can easily break them apart with my fingers when I pour them from my freezer bag.

Rhubarb-fresh and frozen for baked goods.

Winter squash, acorn, spaghetti, buttercup, and pumpkin-fresh, or cooked and then frozen in portions for later use. You may also can pumpkin, but because we don't have a large crop I don't generally have enough to justify canning a batch. I prefer to freeze it in 2 cup size portions for my [Pumpkin Applesauce Cake](#).

Snow peas-what we don't eat fresh I freeze to use in stir-fries.

Canning Crops

I particularly love canning because you don't have to depend on your freezer to keep the harvest preserved. We often lose power, one time up to 14 days, and I know if something happened to our power source, my canned goods would be fine. Plus, it doesn't require any electricity and keeps our bill lower.

There is the one time investment of you canner, jars, and rings. However, the jars and canner lasts for years. The lids aren't too expensive, though you do have to purchase them each year. I put up over a 100 jars this year in our pantry. Check out thrift stores and garage sales for jars. Be sure to run your finger over the rim to check for nicks. If nicked or broken, they won't seal.

You'll find some produce on both lists because I use them in different recipes.

Apples-fresh and canned into applesauce and apple pie filling.

Grapes-fresh and canned into grape jelly. This year I'll be canning my own juice concentrate as well.

Tarheel green pole beans-eat fresh and can. I put up close to fifty jars this year and saved quite a bit of the seed. This was off of just two six foot long rows of beans.

October shelled beans-we eat these fresh, canned, and save the seed. I use them in chili's, soups, and refried.

Tomatoes-fresh, you can freeze them whole to drop into soups and chilis, but I prefer to can them. I make stewed tomatoes and salsas. New this year I'll make my own sauce and ketchup.

Cucumbers-fresh and then canned into pickles. I make garlic dill, bread and butter, and a mustard pickle relish

Raspberries-fresh, frozen, and canned into jelly.

Rhubarb-fresh, frozen, and canned into strawberry rhubarb jam.

Root Cellar Crops

I mentioned before we don't have a root cellar or garage, but we store these items in our pantry (preferably dark) and in boxes on our covered back porch.

Carrots-my neighbor leaves her carrots in the ground and pulls up when needed. They can be canned or stored in the crisper bin of your fridge. Or left in a cool, dry, and dark place.

Garlic-this hangs on a pretty braid in my kitchen

Herbs-I dry them and store them in mason jars.

Onions-keep these dry and well ventilated

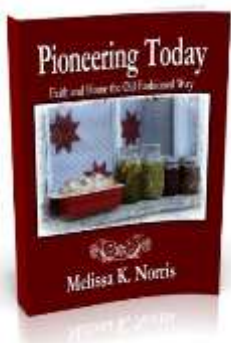
Purple potatoes-heirloom crops are so much more fun than traditional potatoes. We plant purple majesty potatoes (they have 10 times more anti-oxidants than regular potatoes) and still have a good size box at the end of January from our October harvest.

Brussel sprouts-our winter has been mild so I've left these on the vine out in the garden and harvest when needed. If you allow your brussel sprouts to go through at least one frost, they'll be much sweeter.

Conclusion

You should now have a firm idea of what heirloom seeds and plants are. They are a tradition I treasure and one I hope you'll now adapt as your own. I hope you enjoy this introductory guide and it answers your questions and gets you started. I'll be having many posts and articles to help you with this as we progress throughout the seasons.

To make sure you don't miss anything, be sure to sign up for my blog at www.melissaknorris.com and stay on our newsletter list.



For over 40+ traditional recipes, gardening tips, and country living with faith aspects (I'm a Christian and my love for Jesus can't help but flow into every aspect of my life and what I do) you can read the

first chapter of my book *Pioneering Today-Faith and Home the Old Fashioned Way* for FREE at www.melissaknorris.com/books

If you have any questions or would like to see certain sections covered in more depth, please email me at

Melissa@melissaknorris.com

I love to help anyone as much as I can and by answering your questions in a blog post or article, I can help others who most likely have the same questions. So don't be shy about asking. We're all here to learn and if you have any tips, I'll gladly credit you and share them as well.

Pioneering Today Planting Worksheet

If you answer yes to all 5 questions (or close) it's a money saving plant!

Plant	Do we eat a lot of it?	Large crop producer?	Does it preserve well?	Can I sow it directly into the soil?	Is it worth the space?

About the Author



I enjoy living, reading, and writing about the mountain life. I found my own little house in the big woods, where I live with my husband and two children in the Cascade Mountains. I write a monthly column, *Pioneering Today*, for the local newspaper that bridges my love of the past with its usefulness in modern life. My books and articles are inspired by my family's small herd of beef cattle, my amateur barrel racing days, and my forays into quilting and canning—without always reading the directions first.

I grew up reading Laura Ingalls Wilder and my love of books has never stopped

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