

NEWSWORTHY TRENDS

In Tough Economy, Gardening—And Heirlooms—Take Root

(NAPSA)—It's growing season again, and as millions of eager gardeners take to the soil, their goals are many.

First, of course, there's the matter of the economy—more people are opting to grow their own food to save money (a dime's worth of seed can yield about a dollar's worth of fruits and vegetables). And given the recent scares with tainted peanut butter and store-bought produce, food safety is on everyone's mind.

When you grow your own, you not only reduce the risks, but you can also increase the benefits. Enthusiastic home gardeners—in droves—are embracing heirloom vegetables as a healthy and delicious alternative to lackluster modern hybrids.

Heirlooms—vegetables of value that breed true from seed (and thus can be handed down to the next generation)—are diverse in color, shape, size and flavor. Seed Savers Exchange, a nonprofit network of gardeners who collect, share and save heirlooms (thereby promoting agricultural biodiversity), recently mailed 10,000 heirloom tomato and pepper plants to gardeners in just one month—double its usual amount.

One expert not surprised by that statistic is Amy P. Goldman (Board Chair of Seed Savers), whose recent book, "The Heirloom Tomato: From Garden to Table," cemented her reputation as an authority on heirloom growing and seed preservation.

"Heirloom tomatoes are the people's tomatoes, bred by farmers and gardeners and designed to be homegrown," she said. "Growing your own saves money but there are also intangible benefits: Nearly everyone has room, even in a window box, to cultivate a little piece of happiness."

There's so much more to the world of tomatoes than most of us realize. Red may be the norm, but vive la difference! There's the yellow and red Big Rainbow, the green-when-ripe Aunt Ruby's German Green, the maroon Black Cherry—and the list goes on.

• In her book, Goldman provides seed sources, fascinating vignettes of the growers who bred and preserved these wondrous fruits, and delectable recipes.



Amy Goldman has championed growing heirloom tomatoes for health and economic reasons.

There's detailed information for selection of the best tomato varieties to grow according to one's taste, cooking preferences and climate, as well as everything you need to know to grow your own tomatoes successfully. Some of the tips for starting seeds include:

- Start tomato seeds inside five to six weeks in advance of setting them out at the frost-free date. Tomato seeds germinate best when given a measured supply of water, cover of darkness and plenty of heat.

Insulated seed trays with water reservoirs and capillary matting make the best seedbeds; ordinary seed trays are also fine. Fill your seedbed with a sterile artificial soil mix (containing materials such as peat moss, vermiculite and perlite) and water until thoroughly wetted; allow it to drain.

- Space five or six seeds equidistant on top of the moistened soil in each seed cell, and label as you go. Dust a quarter-inch layer of potting mix on top and tamp down. Water with lukewarm water, cover and set aside in a warm dark place. Early tomatoes will emerge in as little as three days. Uncover the tray and place under a fluorescent light rigged with a timer to provide 16 hours of light daily.

- Thin seedlings to one per cell; feed with a half-strength liquid fertilizer weekly and pot up into individual pots after the first set of true leaves (not the seedling leaves the plantlet was born with) appear.

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