

HEIRLOOMS AND NATIVES: REAL HAND-ME-DOWNS

By Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener, March, 2024

Ah, finally, it's March. As I write this, I have a big container of seeds and roots that I am eager to plant, everything from canna lilies to zinnias, most of which have been gifts from various friends and relatives over the years. Although not all the seeds I am planting will be heirlooms, seeds handed down from year to year is a long-honored tradition in my family. I know that my grandmother and my mother kept seeds from season to season, and it must have also been true of generations before them, when people were as likely to save seeds as to order seeds from catalogs.

When I wander around our gardens and lawn, I see some of those heirlooms popping up, signaling that spring is well on its way. Irises, peonies, and various bulbs remind me of the friends and family members who've given me those plants or progenitors of current ones over the years.

Even gardening organizations sometimes get into the act with heirlooms as they select specific plants for their "plant of the year." Frederick County Master Gardeners follow the University of Maryland Extension Office's selections. For 2024, the UMD Home and Garden Information Center's Grow It–Eat It program has selected the heirloom tomato. This tomato comes in different sizes, shapes, and colors. While seeds were originally passed down through families like mine, a concerted effort to maintain the heirloom tomato has been going on since before World War II.

Just what are heirloom plants? According to Wikipedia, an heirloom plant is a cultivar of a plant long used for food grown and maintained by gardeners or farmers. Heirloom plants are popular often because many are natives. Think of them as the ultimate BOGO—you get some seeds from your favored group or nursery to start your plants, then save seeds from those plants you've cultivated to pass on to others.

Whether you want to perpetuate heirloom plants or not, adding native plants to your garden is often recommended for various practical reasons, including that they provide much-needed food sources for our native bees, butterflies, birds, and other creatures. While the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) would love to see 100 percent native plants in everyone's gardens, the organization realizes that most of us have already-established gardens of trees, shrubs, lawns, etc., that probably are not fully native. So NWF recommends that you at least aim for 50 to 70 percent native plants "to provide multi-season bloom, including flowers, shrubs, grasses, and groundcovers and trees."

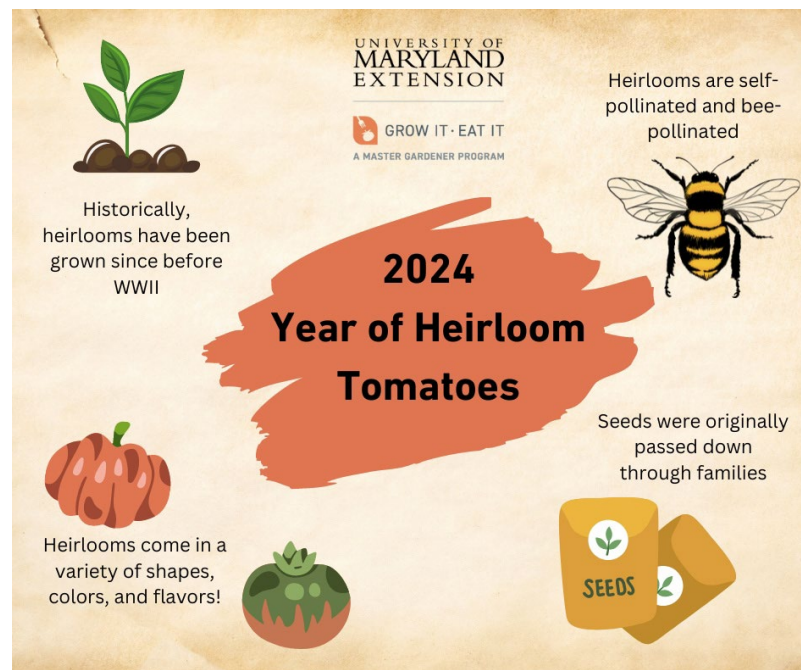
Your nursery person or a local seed preservation organization can also suggest native plants that you can use for propagating seeds or dividing plants. Armed with that info, you can continue the tradition of heirloom plants, the real hand-me-downs!

Some changes have taken place in the University of Maryland Extension Service website. The state Master Gardener program has been moved to the Home and Garden Information Center. In addition, some links from the *county* Master Gardener pages to the *state* Master Gardener Program are being revised. You will still be able to use quick links to the Master Gardener home page: <https://go.umd.edu/MG>.



The University of Maryland Extension's Home and Garden Center, Grow It-Eat It Program has selected the heirloom tomato as its vegetable of the year for 2024. (photo courtesy of the University of Maryland Extension)

As this poster shows, the University of Maryland Extension's Home and Garden Center, Grow It-Eat It Program, points out the advantages of heirloom tomatoes. (photo courtesy of the University of Maryland Extension)





A wooden bench nestles among numerous summer-flowering native plants in a local master gardener's garden. (photo courtesy of Bunny LaDouceur, Frederick County master gardener)

Check our website or Facebook for upcoming free seminars, Master Gardener certification classes, as well as other announcements. For more information about the Frederick County Extension Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, gardening information and advice visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596. Find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>.
UME Home & Garden Information Center,
<https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environmentnatural-resources/program-areas/home-and-garden-information-center>.

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