



Heirloom

By Marcia Rae
May 12, 2010

You may have noticed the growing availability of heirloom fruits and vegetables in produce isles of the grocery stores. But what, exactly, does that mean?

Well, first understand that most of our food comes from monoculture sources. That means that large tracts of land are planted with plants that are all exactly the same. This can be accomplished by grafting or cloning, but mostly happens when hybrid seeds are created with controlled cross-breeding. This practice became popular after World War II and is (somewhat) credited with the phenomenal success we have had in producing an abundance of food worldwide.

One of the problems with hybrid seeds is that the farmer cannot save seeds from his own crops for planting in the next season. Seeds must be re-purchased each year. Hybrid seeds are typically patented and owned. Upwards of 90% of all corn, soybeans and cotton are grown from genetically engineered seeds, also known as genetically modified organisms (GMOs). These genetically enhanced products appear in around 70% of all American processed food products. And Monsanto controls 90% of all genetically engineered seeds.

In other words, Monsanto controls -- and owns patents on -- most of the American food supply. Monsanto acquired almost 40 companies "creating the horizontal and vertical integration that underlies the firm's platforms in cotton, corn, and soybeans," according to a whitepaper by American Antitrust Institute's vice president and senior fellow, Diana Moss. Seed prices have risen 64% in the last three years.

The other problem with having so much of the world's food supply tied up in monoculture crops is that the gene pool is diminished. A similar situation existed in Ireland when the environment changed and blight hit the potato crop between 1845 and 1852. Potatoes are propagated by cloning and the Irish favored Lumpers almost universally. The genetically identical lumpers were susceptible to a rot caused by *Phytophthora infestans*, which turns non-resistant potatoes to inedible slime. One million people died and another one million emigrated.

Heirloom seeds, on other hand, means that seeds are created with open pollination -- pollination arising when, insects, birds, wind and other natural mechanisms produce new generations of plants with widely genetic traits. These seeds are not usually patented, although commercial seed savers capture them and sell them. Prior to the proliferation of hybrid seeds, seeds were passed down within families and from farmer to farmer. Some are pre-historic.

When you purchase produce from heirloom varieties, you are supporting bio-diversity and lessening the impact of agriculture giants. You may also want to plant heirloom varieties in your garden -- they are typically tastier. You can purchase open pollinated seeds at the Brownsville Farmers Market from local grower, Adaptive Seed or visit their web-site, adaptiveseeds.com

Munch On This -- Who controls the seeds, controls the food supply. Why not go for a bit of biodiversity?

PS -- See you at the Farmers Market this Saturday, 9 a.m. to noon.

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