



Boánn's Banks

Sustainable Agriculture Along the Broad River

July 6, 2002

This Week at Market

- Lambs' Quarters
- Carrots "Red Core Chantenay" and "Kuttiger"
- Rutabaga "Joan"
- Beets "Albina Verduna"
- Blackberries
- Eggs from Free Range Hens

Hello! The farm is still in transition between spring and summer crops. The tomato vines are full of fruit, the bean bushes are producing young pods, and the squash plants are all in bloom. We've harvested a few new items, including heirloom tomatoes and field peas, but they've been spoken for by our "meal plan" subscribers. These wonderful people paid in advance at the beginning of the growing season providing the farm with much needed seed money, and in return they get a

discount at market, a say in what gets grown, and first access to the produce. We'll have more in the upcoming weeks. Until then, there are plenty of root vegetables, tasty and nutritious Lamb's Quarters, and the first wave in what will be a flood of fresh eggs. If you're interested in the meal plan program, ask us for details. Thanks for coming to market this week. Eat well!

-- Chris and Eric Wagoner
www.boannsbanks.com
706-245-9774

Heirloom Vegetables - What are they?

There isn't an "Heirloom Certification Board" or anything like that, so there are differing definitions of what an heirloom vegetable is. Despite that, there are two main criteria. First, the variety must be old. Second, it must be open pollinated.

The "old" requirement is most often the difference between definitions. Modern hybrid breeding began in 1951, and all definitions agree an heirloom can't be more recent than that. Some go earlier, arbitrarily picking 1930 as the cut-off date. And some others insist on 100 years or older, much like antiques. Some heirlooms are much older, stretching back many hundreds or even thousands of years.

Open pollination is a more rigid requirement. This means that is the vegetable's flower is pollinated with pollen from the same variety, the seeds will produce plants that have the same traits as the parents, or are "true to type". Most hybrids, even if pollinated with its own pollen, produce a wide range of children with unpredictable traits. Some plants do not propagate via seed, but the principle remains the same for them. For example, an heirloom potato will produce tubers that can be planted and will result in identical tubers.

We use the term heirloom to mean pre-1951 open pollinated varieties. Some people add additional requirements, though. For example, "Clemson Spineless Okra" was introduced in 1939 and is OP. However, we've heard some people state that it's not an heirloom because it was developed by the government (Clemson University) and not by a family farmer. Likewise, others are stricter still and rule out any variety developed by a commercial company, such as seed catalogs.

If you happen to live in an area that is an heirloom's historical home, you may find that variety very easy to grow. More often, though, you'll find them harder to grow. They can be more susceptible to disease and environmental fluctuations. Modern hybrids often have resistances and increased durability bred into them for these things, but usually this resistance comes at the cost of flavor. Also, many heirlooms have physical traits such as color or shape that set them apart. Many hybrids are bred to look like "the ideal" or to be easier for machine processing, like carrots all exactly the same size or square watermelons.

There are many reasons to grow heirlooms. We've already mentioned taste and appearance. Another reason is the preservation of genetic diversity. Every time an open pollinated variety is lost to us and hybrids become more prevalent, the more vulnerable our food supply is to pests and disease. We saw in the late 70's what can happen when a single variety of corn was grown to the virtual exclusion of all others in the mid-west, and a disease came along that attacked that specific variety and nearly wiped out our corn supply. Also, there's some satisfaction in knowing that you are keeping history alive. Many heirlooms have stories behind them (as the year goes on, we'll highlight some of those stories in this newsletter), so the produce becomes part of that story and more than just food on the plate.

There are many resources available for those interested in heirlooms. One of the better books we've run across is **Heirloom Vegetable Gardening** by William Weaver and Peter Hatch. There are many organizations on-line as well, including the Abundant Life Seed Foundation at <http://www.abundantlifeseed.org/> and the Seed Savers Exchange at <http://www.seedsavers.org/>

At Boánn's Banks, we grow heirlooms whenever possible. Currently about 80% of our varieties qualify, and we'll have more next year.