

Heirloom vs. Hybrid

I University of Idaho
Extension
Kootenai County
958 South Lochsa St
Post Falls, ID 83854

Phone: (208) 292-2525
FAX: (208) 292-2670
E-mail: kootenai@uidaho.edu
Web: uidaho.edu/kootenai



Heirloom Vegetables

Heirloom vegetables are not a special species of plants. The term heirloom vegetable is used to describe any type of vegetable seed that has been saved and grown for a period of years and is passed down by the gardener that preserved it. It has a provenance, of sorts. To be capable of being saved, all heirloom seed must be open pollinated.

Open pollinated or OP plants are simply varieties that are capable of producing seeds that will produce seedlings just like the parent plant. Not all plants do this.

Hybrid Vegetables

To create hybrid vegetables, breeders select desirable characteristics from two or more unique parent plants (*of the same genus, species or variety*) and cross-pollinate them in a controlled environment to create a plant with the best features of the parent plants. Hybrid vegetables have benefits such as disease resistance, higher yields and better uniformity. For instance, hybrid sweet corns may capture more sweetness, longer holding ability, crisper or creamier kernel texture and so forth. Hybrid tomatoes combine parents that may have a certain flavor, larger size or fewer seeds. Seeds saved from hybrids tend to revert to the qualities of the individual parents, so if you replant seed saved from a hybrid, the resulting produce will not be the same as in the previous year. Hybrid vegetables have been available to the garden public for well over 50 years. We would greatly miss popular hybrid varieties such as Early Girl, Celebrity and Big Beef Tomatoes, Jubilee and Xtra Sweet sweet corns, Stonehead cabbage and Bell Boy pepper to name just a few.

Is a GMO the same as a hybrid?

NO. There is an increasing amount of misleading and false information regarding GMO's (*genetically modified organisms*) and how they are being confused with hybrids. We'll try to simplify the differences to make them easier to understand.

Hybrids should not be confused with GMO's.

The description of a GMO is a variety that contains one or more genes from an entirely different species and is genetically altered using molecular genetics such as gene cloning and protein engineering. An example of a GMO is a field crop such as corn that has the pesticide Bt engineered into its genetic makeup to make it resistant to certain pests. Bt is a natural pesticide, but it would never find its way naturally into corn seed. GMO seed varieties will retain their original characteristics if saved and replanted, but because GMO seeds are patented by the companies producing them, intellectual property rights restrict using saved seed the next season.

We understand and share concerns voiced by environmental groups and consumer advocates regarding GMOs. It's our hope that gardeners and consumers take a responsible approach and search out the facts about all facets, from researched-based organizations on this confusing and controversial topic.