

The University of **North Carolina** Press

A Conversation with Lynn Coulter

Author of *Gardening with Heirloom Seeds:*

Tried-and-True Flowers, Fruits, and Vegetables for a New Generation

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Q: What are heirloom seeds?

A: Heirlooms are flowers, fruits, and vegetables that have been around for fifty years or more, living antiques that have been passed down from one generation to the next. Heirloom seeds also grow true to type, unlike the seeds of modern hybrids.

Q: How did you begin gardening with them?

A: A magazine assignment led me to University of Georgia Professors Robert E. Rhoades and Virginia Nazarea. As co-founders of the Southern Seed Legacy Project, they host an annual "seed swap" at their farm near Crawford, Georgia. I spent one afternoon there, trading the seeds of many wonderful, old varieties with fellow gardeners, and I was hooked. I wanted to learn more about where the seeds came from and how they grew.

Q: Is it difficult to grow heirlooms?

A: Many are actually easier to grow than newer plants! That's because heirlooms are survivors, usually able to grow and reproduce without human help. Over time, they've adapted to whatever climate and soil they've grown in, and thanks to their genetics, most have become highly resistant to pests, diseases, and extremes of weather.

Q: The history of heirloom seeds is so rich. When did you become curious about them?

A: I enjoy stories, so exploring the stories behind our heirlooms—and the gardeners who grew them—was a natural fit. It's fascinating to learn that eating ordinary garden peas was once "...both a fashion and a madness" in the court of King Louis XIV, or that Linnaeus reportedly observed nasturtiums that gave off sparks of light.

Q: Which seed sources do you recommend?

A: I love the flowers offered through Select Seeds (www.selectseeds.com) and Renee's Garden (www.reneesgarden.com). Seed Savers Exchange of Decorah, Iowa, is a great source for vegetables and fruits (www.seedsavers.org). You may also find heirloom seeds sold or traded through your state's agricultural department bulletin.

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Q: *Gardening with Heirloom Seeds* mentions a number of fruits and vegetables, from Brandywine to Golden Peach, Gilfeather to Snowball. How many edible heirlooms have made it to your kitchen?

A: Lots! I love tomatoes, so I'm always experimenting with different flavors and textures and colors. *Moon and Stars* watermelons are popular at my house, too, along with tender, buttery-mild heirloom lettuces and crunchy *French Breakfast* radishes.

Q: There are many beautiful heirloom plants pictured in *Gardening with Heirloom Seeds*. Which of these have you had the most luck growing?

A: Big, cheerful sunflowers grow nicely for me, although the birds raid them for their tasty seeds. Morning glories, like *Grandpa Ott's*, make a shady, lush curtain of deep purple blossoms for my porch. *Teatime* four o'clocks also grow well here.

Q: Which are your favorites?

A: I love *Bunny Bloom* larkspurs, which are so carefree and colorful, and each spring, I plant *Empress of India* nasturtiums, with lily pad-shaped leaves, in my hanging baskets. Then I like columbines, which attract hummingbirds, and scarlet-red poppies, and spicy-scented pinks. In fact—I like them all.

Q: How were the photographs and images compiled for this book?

A: Most were generously contributed by gardeners, photographers, and seed sellers who recognize the value and pleasure of growing heirlooms. The project would not have been possible without the assistance of Marilyn Barlow, of Select Seeds; David Cavagnaro, of David Cavagnaro Photography; Renee Shepherd, of Renee's Garden; and Aaron Whaley, of Seed Savers Exchange. Other images were reproduced from antique, out-of-copyright seed catalogs I purchased on eBay.

Q: Of the gardening seasons, which one have you found the most rewarding?

A: Spring is probably my favorite, as it's filled with promise. But then, summer offers the pleasure of seeing all that hard work come to fruition, and fall brings the harvest.

Q: Will casual gardeners enjoy this book?

A: Yes. It's designed for gardeners who have time to only dip into a chapter here and there, as well as for those who prefer to read cover-to-cover. There are tips on growing and finding each heirloom variety, and on making the most of your harvest, whether you're interested in fruits, flowers, or vegetables. You don't need to be an expert.

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Q: Your love of gardening comes through in these pages. How do you make it through a long winter?

A: I'm lucky to live in the South, where I can grow pansies and flowering kales for cold-weather color. Other than that, I subscribe to lots of seed catalogs, so I can be ready when spring finally arrives.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: An interview with Lynn Coulter, author of *GARDENING WITH HEIRLOOM SEEDS: TRIED-AND-TRUE FLOWERS, FRUITS, AND VEGETABLES FOR A NEW GENERATION* (University of North Carolina Press, Spring 2006). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/coulter.

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