

What's old is **NEW AGAIN**

While the term “heirloom” may have been popularized in the early 1980s as it refers to seed, more recently there is renewed interest in these “old” seed varieties. Johnny’s Selected Seeds offers 92 varieties of heirloom seeds, including flowers, herbs, and vegetables. Tony Vinci, Vegetable Product Manager at Johnny’s, says there is growing demand for heirloom varieties, due to the vegetables often unique appearance and outstanding flavor, with demand coming mainly from tomato lovers. “It is mostly tomatoes that are the driving force behind heirlooms,” says Vinci. “They get the most attention. There are literally thousands of those out there. Our most popular variety is the Brandywine – people rave about its excellent flavor, they say it’s the best tomato ever.”

People don’t just like the flavor of heirloom varieties, there is also the desire for something unique. “The appeal of heirlooms comes from the stories behind the varieties, and the oddities – the different colors, shapes, and flavors,” says Vinci. “For example there is a bicolor tomato that can’t be found outside the heirloom world.” This tomato, the Striped German, is mostly yellow on the outside with a red blush, and when sliced open is a marbled yellow and red – not your average supermarket tomato. Another unique example is the Chioggia beet from Italy, a well-known variety that has concentric rings of white and red on the inside.

“There is a big demand from chefs, partly because of appearance and also because heirlooms often have excellent flavor,” says Vinci. “Plus the Slow Food movement, with its emphasis on local food and older varieties, has also had an effect on demand.” While most of the demand comes from home and market gardeners, the larger producers and shippers are realizing the demand possibilities as well, and that market is starting to evolve.

Johnny’s sources its heirloom varieties in two distinct ways. Some seed companies grow and sell heirloom varieties (which are also known as heritage varieties) so they can buy them from their suppliers, but Vinci notes they also get a number of donations from their customers. “A customer may have been growing

a variety for a long time, or gotten it from someone who’s been growing it for years and thought it might be of interest to us,” says Vinci. “We’ll put it in our trial, and a lot of times it doesn’t suit our needs, but sometimes there are some real winners.”

With this renewed interest in heirloom varieties, it looks like what’s old is new again.



The Chioggia beet has an attractive root with alternating red and white concentric rings. This striking variety is a favorite in specialty markets.