



Heirlooms - Old Fashioned Beauties

By Tammy Borden ©

When we hear seasoned gardeners proudly talking about their heirloom plants, they often boast about their wonderful tomatoes and vegetable varieties. And rightfully so! My favorite tomato is a variety that my uncle Ralph has been saving seeds from for nearly 40 years. We don't know the name, but they reliably produce large, pink, meaty and delicious tomatoes year after year.

Still, my latest fascination is large heirloom annuals for the back of the border. As I thumbed through my Seed Saver Exchange catalogue I couldn't help but notice that of the 79 pages, there were only 9 featuring flowering annuals. Of the dozen or so varieties of plants beneath grow lights in my basement, half are heirlooms. So, I thought I'd share some with you... via paper, that is!

Night Scented Tobacco (*Nicotiana sylvestris*)

An amazingly stunning plant. Its stately stalks hold hundreds of long 3" trumpet-shaped white flowers that attract hummingbirds. Also referred to as Woodland Tobacco, it reaches 5' tall. The tiny seeds germinate easily and it seems almost impossible for such an impressive plant to be produced from a seed smaller than a grain of salt. The foliage is impressive too, with leaves reaching 6" or more across.

Hyacinth Bean Vine (*Dolichos lablab*)

Even if this plant never bloomed, I'd still grow it for its lush deep blue/green foliage laced with veins of burgundy, and accented by strong purple stems. When flowers appear in late summer it takes your breath away, and the glossy maroon pods that follow are beautiful and exotic looking. It will quickly take over a trellis and grow 10-15' if given the room. A must have.

Grandpa Otts Morning Glory Vine (*Ipomoea purpurea*)

This variety of morning glory is so beautiful that it helped inspire the formation of The Seed Saver's Exchange. It was originally introduced in 1930. The color is an intense violet-blue, with a ruby star in the center. The vine will cover fences and trellises, or can be grown as a groundcover. Also looks great in hanging baskets or pots. Very easy to grow, even in poor soil, and has reseeded itself readily in my garden.

Bells of Ireland (*Moluccella laevis*)

I confess that it is not a long-time favorite. In fact, this is the first year I've tried growing them. I was told they were hard to start from seed, so I took on the challenge, and every seed sprouted! The key was placing the planted seeds, soil and all, inside the refrigerator for a week. When I removed them and placed them beneath grow lights, they sprouted within a few days. I'm excited to see these 2-3 foot beauties featuring stalks of bright green "bells" lighting up a sunny spot in my garden this year. The ruffled seedlings are already intriguing!

Kiss Me Over the Garden Gate (*Polygonum orientale*)

My friend, Kay, suggested this plant. She's even used it in bouquets for a wedding. Its graceful arching pink fronds mixed with sunflowers are especially beautiful. Give it room at the back of a sunny border and this 6' tall wonder will keep blooming all summer. Once you find seeds for this annual, you'll most likely never have to buy them again since it readily self-sows in your garden. It's hard to transplant, so if you start it indoors, be sure to use a peat pot that can go directly in the ground.

The beauty of heirloom flowers is not just in their appearance. As mentioned, by saving seeds from these beauties you can continue the cycle of life for generations. Plus, heirlooms are generally more resistant to diseases and problems that many hybrids, requiring fewer chemicals and fuss. Try some of these varieties and find that what's old is new again.