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SAVING SEEDS, SHARING STORIES

HOW DIANE OTT WHEALY HELPED BRING BACK HEIRLOOMS

BY RENEE BRINCKS

Diane Ott Whealy can easily explain what led her to co-found Seed Savers Exchange 35 years ago, before terms like heirloom, slow food and locavore were common in conversations of eating and gardening. In fact, this spring she'll release a book chronicling the nonprofit organization's development. Rather than just tell the story, however, Ott Whealy prefers to demonstrate what inspired her.

"Sometimes, genetic diversity is hard to describe. It's sort of an abstract concept. But if people can actually see peppers and squash and lettuce and beautiful tomatoes of every size, shape and color, they can understand what we're trying to save," she says. "It's not just a red tomato. It's 20 different colors of tomatoes."

Ott Whealy and her then husband, Kent Whealy, started Seed Savers in 1975. The goal was to maintain genetic diversity by collecting, preserving and sharing rare seed varieties traditionally passed down through generations. Today, approximately 13,000 gardeners, farmers, chefs and supporters hold Seed Savers memberships, and members and non-members alike can order from the organization's extensive collection of heirloom vegetable, fruit, flower and herb seeds.

After beginning with two seed varieties, Seed Savers' collection has grown to approximately 25,000 seed records. Many are grown on a rotating basis at Heritage Farm, the nonprofit's 890-acre headquarters seven miles north of Decorah. Twenty miles south of Heritage Farm, Ott Whealy grew up gardening with her grandparents and working on her parents' farm. There, she learned about stewardship and living off the land.

"Growing up on a dairy farm, I was definitely connected to food and gardening," she says. "My mother had a garden, and we canned, and it was an important part of our lives...I had a great fascination with this land and how people provided for themselves before the introduction of all our modern conveniences."

As an example she cites her grandmother, who raised nine children during the Great Depression by growing and preserving much of the family's food. Ott Whealy also remembers her mother planning meals around what was in season, such as corn on the cob or strawberry shortcake made with fresh fruit.

"We ate seasonally – it was unintentional, but that's how we ate at that time," she says. "That was our natural lifestyle. I was really very fortunate."

When she was newly married and ready to plant her own garden, Ott Whealy turned to her grandfather. As a child, she'd spent many afternoons sitting among his morning glory vines, listening to him tell stories. When he shared morning glory and German pink tomato seeds to get her started, they, too, came with a tale.

"He said his parents had actually brought that seed with them when they immigrated to St. Lucas from Bavaria. I never knew that – I just thought Grandpa had them, and I never thought about how they got there," says Ott Whealy. "It was such a living link to my ancestors...I had family living in Germany, and now I had a part of their garden in my hand."

The experience got the young couple thinking about how easily seeds, and the stories behind them, could be lost or forgotten – particularly in a place like Iowa, where families often carried seeds from other countries when they settled the countryside. To advance the preservation and circulation of those heirloom varieties, Kent and Diane Ott Whealy launched Seed Savers.

Initially, awareness of the organization spread through back-to-the-land publications and word of mouth. Slowly, more and more people expressed interest. Some shared individual seeds. Others donated whole collections of beans, tomatoes or peppers. Ott Whealy says Seed Savers acquired some non-hybrid seeds from catalogs, and collected others on trips to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. She credits supporters nationwide for helping make the nonprofit's collection what it is today.

"We were so surprised and pleased that there were other people out there encouraging us, saying, 'Yes, we do need to save the older varieties of seed, and thank you for doing this,'" she says.

Ott Whealy attributes Seed Savers' growth to several other factors, as well. For one, she and Whealy were eventually able to leave their full- and part-time jobs to concentrate on building the organization and raising their five children. In addition, a feature article in *Organic Gardening* magazine provided national exposure that turned attention to their efforts. As new members and grant-making foundations supported Seed Savers, the co-founders also began searching for a permanent home and demonstration farm.

In 1987, Seed Savers moved to what is now Heritage Farm. About 60 employees now tend to thousands of organic heirloom fruits and

vegetables there, and the fertile, forested acres include an orchard with pre-1900 apple varieties and a collection of grapes. To remind visitors that the genetic diversity of livestock, like that of plants, is also threatened, a herd of rare ancient white park cattle grazes the property. The Lillian Goldman Visitors Center (open March through December) houses a gift and garden shop, educational exhibits and event space; this spring, nature walks, an apple grafting workshop and a plant sale are all on the schedule. Seed Savers' annual conference, headlined in 2011 by author and scientist Vandana Shiva, will also be held on the grounds from July 15-17 (Edible Iowa publisher Kurt Michael Friese will be speaking there too!).

The scope of it all surpasses Ott Whealy's own early expectations for the organization.

"Even in my biggest dreams, to have this beautiful farm of almost 900 acres and people coming here to help us out in our work is really more than I could have ever imagined," she says.

Rosalind Creasy, who wrote 17 gardening books including the recent release, *Edible Landscaping*, believes Ott Whealy has played an integral role in the development of Seed Savers as well as the larger culinary industry. Creasy, who joined the Seed Savers board of directors three years ago, first became acquainted with the organization as she was researching her first book in the late 1970s. She remembers the Seed Savers co-founders having the vision and conviction to see their work through at a time when the United States was moving toward mass-produced foods transported great distances. As vegetables seemed to be falling out of favor, Ott Whealy worked to keep natural, healthy fare in the spotlight.

"Diane is the dynamic focus...she is one of the people who knows the evolution of seed saving the best," says Creasy. "She is a very firm and loving foundation to the organization."

Since those early years, Creasy has watched Ott Whealy share not only gardening knowledge, but also knowledge related to canning and cooking with heirloom varieties. For that reason, Creasy lists her among women who made "a profound and unrecognized contribution to what we now serve on the table" – including pioneers such as chef Alice Waters, Renee Shepherd of Renee's Garden and the former Shepherd's Seeds, and author and nursery owner Rose Marie Nichols McGee. Creasy calls Ott Whealy's upcoming book a good story that provides background for "people who don't know much about why they can go to the farmers' market and get heirloom seeds, tomatoes or melons."

"I just felt like the history needs to be told because it hasn't always been like this," says Ott Whealy. "It was the result of a lot of people's efforts and sacrifices and hard work over the years. That's why Seed Savers is here today."

She sees her own role in the organization as one of nurturing, protecting and promoting growth, and she finds herself inspired, in part, by the way her mother and grandmothers approached their own work. "The women in my life have given it their all, their heart and soul," she says. "They never expected to be singled out...their ego didn't have to be fed. Their joy was just knowing that they were doing the best they could in providing for their family...It isn't about the glory; it's about what you're doing."

As she cultivates Seed Savers' programs and offerings, Ott Whealy also encourages beginning gardeners not to be intimidated by growing or saving seeds.

"When I grew up, gardening was just a natural thing. You planted the seeds, you weeded, you hoed, you harvested. Now people think it's more difficult than it needs to be," she says. "They think they need special tools and books, and I'm not saying you can't have those



Diane Ott Whealy (center), co-founder of Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, shows visitors around the glorious gardens of Heritage Farm

things, but I like to encourage people to just garden. It's the experience that is most helpful."

Customers at all stages of gardening order different varieties from the Seed Savers catalog, though carrots, beans, tomatoes and moon & stars watermelon are among the most popular. And, not surprisingly, so is the seed that started it all.

"In general, seeds that have a story and are productive and beautiful and practical and easy to grow are popular. Our number one seller is probably Grandpa Ott's Morning Glory seed, because I tell the story a lot and it is a beautiful plant," Ott Whealy says. "It's interesting how people like stories."

GET YOUR SEEDS

Seed Savers Exchange, Decorah

To request a catalog, order seeds, register for membership or learn more about Seed Savers Exchange, visit www.SeedSavers.org or call 563.382.5990.