

Connolly: The art of picking seeds

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Food prices may be on the way up again, due in part to the California drought. This month, many will consider the benefits of growing our own fruits and veggies-and all those beautiful seed catalogs and retail seed displays are there to encourage that thought.

But new seed buyers may find themselves wishing they understood some terms and concepts. Seed packets and seed catalogs - beautiful and inviting as they are - have so many features to consider. For instance, do you buy organic, ecologically grown, or conventional seed? What's all this about germination rates, disease-resistance and performance under various weather conditions?

Above all, new seed buyers may be confused by the industry's hottest topics: Open-pollinated, heirloom, hybrid. And what do all of those have to do with genetic engineering, GE, or genetically modified organisms, GMO?

Let's start with open-pollinated seeds, which form when pollen is spread between two parent plants of the same species by birds, insects, wind or other natural forces. The child plants will be like their parents in important ways, and seed can be saved year after year. Over several generations growing in the same location, an open-pollinated variety becomes adapted to the soil and weather and its pollinator species. These plants perform best in locations similar to the ones where they developed. Connecticut Field Pumpkins and Wethersfield Red Onions, for instance, are likely to perform best in areas similar to the Connecticut River valley.

Where do heirlooms fit in this scheme?

"When open-pollinated strains are in continuous cultivation for 50 or more years, they are considered heirlooms," says Randel Agrella, general manager of Comstock Ferre/Baker Creek, a Wethersfield company that specializes in these types of seeds.

But even as open-pollinated and heirloom seeds inspire an almost religious fervor among seed savers, these plants are sometimes harder to maintain.

Enter the hybrids-"children" of two related parent species, deliberately selected and crossed by humans for increased sturdiness, longevity, beauty or other features. Among tomatoes, for instance, hybrids are often created for disease or insect resistance. These seeds should not be saved unless you're willing to take the chance on the "child" plant reverting to one of the parents. If you liked the hybrid the year before, you'll need to order again in the spring.

Hartford's New England Seed, for instance, offers 50 tomato varieties, including open-pollinated, heirloom and hybrid. President Ted Willard says, "People love the idea of heirlooms. But sometimes I think they really want the taste of an heirloom and

the modern breeding characteristics of a hybrid." He says that seed producers are on a quest for hybrids with the flavor of heirlooms.

And what about organic, ecologically grown and conventional seed?

If you want certified organic seed, the green and white USDA symbol is a must-have at this time.

The label provides assurance that the seed was produced without synthetic chemical pesticides or fertilizers, is not chemically treated, and was not knowingly grown from genetically engineered seed, non-GMO or non-GE, among a number of other safeguards.

But then there are ecologically grown seeds, which can mean a number of different things-all of them striving towards organic standards or even more. For instance, a farmer may follow organic standards for three to five years before receiving official USDA certification. In the meantime, he or she may sign a "farmer's pledge" testifying to the use of organic standards. This is but one example of how ecologically grown seeds get that name.

If seeds do not have any label indicating organic or sustainable growing practices, they are usually called "conventional." That simply means they may have been grown under conventional farming techniques which include the possibility (but not inevitability) of synthetic chemicals, among other things. These seeds can be relied upon to grow fine plants. And you can grow those using organic techniques in your own garden.

As for genetic engineering, we home seed buyers seemingly have little to fear at the garden center.

"I'm not aware of any genetically engineered varieties available to the home grower market," says Willard, whose family has been in the seed business since the 1890s. Accidental crosses with genetically engineered plants, however, are a controversial topic for another day.

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Resources for seed starting are many:

Home Garden Seed Association: www.ezfromseed.org

Kitchen Gardeners International: www.kgi.org

Seed saving: www.seedsavers.org

"Seed to Seed" by Suzanne Ashworth

"The New Seed Starters Handbook" by Nancy Bubel.