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Connolly: Connecticut's long, rich history of providing seed for growers

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They're back, those little envelopes with pictures of flowers so perfect they could break your heart. "Take me to the cash register," they call. All too often, I do - sometimes, a few too many, but what's the harm?

If you like buying local, you may be surprised to learn that in Connecticut, you have five seed companies to choose among. According to Sandy Marshall at Hart Seeds in Wethersfield, there were 22 such companies in the state at one time. Hart, for instance, is the oldest seed company in America still run by the family that started it - currently the fourth and fifth generations.

In fact, early 19th century Connecticut entrepreneurs were among the first movers in the U.S. commercial seed industry and Wethersfield has been called the cradle of that endeavor.

Across from Hart on Wethersfield's main street, Comstock Ferre was the site of the first seed company in the U.S. around 1824. Today it is owned by Baker Creek Heirloom Seed, which has formed a nonprofit to run the historic grounds and buildings. In addition to selling both Comstock Ferre and Baker Creek seeds, general manager Randel Agrella says they plan an educational focus that will include more public events like their Sunday afternoon seminars and annual open house on May 25.

The 19th century forerunners actually had many things in common with today's seed companies. They selected varieties, conducted growing trials, packaged and marketed their products. But those early seed companies were fully integrated operations that grew product in their own fields or contracted its growing nearby, then harvested and cleaned seed as well.

Ted Willard is a fourth-generation Connecticut seedsman whose family operated Comstock Ferre for more than a century.

"The Connecticut River Valley used to be full of seed growers," says Willard. "Today, almost no commercial seed is sourced in the eastern U.S." Willard left the family business and in 1987 with several business partners formed the New England Seed Company in Hartford.

"I remember when my dad closed the last of the seed farms in 1959," Willard continues. "Labor, climate, and land costs are all more conducive to seed production in the Midwest and West." He recalls when his father was approached by an Idaho farmer about contract growing in 1939, a date that may have marked the beginning of this sea change.

Another difference between then and now is delivery. The old seed companies loaded up horse-drawn carriages with consignment boxes and delivered them to the retailers of the day.

"Before the Civil War, without reliable postal service, the owners

would travel a route, dropping off wooden boxes of seed packets and picking up the empties," says Comstock Ferre/Baker Creek's Randel Agrella. Some of those boxes are on display at the Comstock Ferre building.

But like the seed companies of former days, perhaps the main goal is still to find and deliver the best seed for the best varieties.

Today's vegetable seed buyers tend to define "best" by flavor and color.

Lance Frazon, manager in charge of John Scheepers Kitchen Garden Seeds in Bantam, says he spends much of his time finding "the best growers of the varieties we've identified."

This quest is exacting. Seed production has high standards - in many ways more exacting than food or flower production. "I'll work with any company in the world to get what I'm looking for," he says. Frazon says it can take several years to identify a variety, put it through growing trials, find a source, and bring it to market.

In the world of flower seeds, open pollinated varieties are popular - in part because the gardener can save seed.

"Promoting open-pollinated flowers is close to our heart, as so many of these flowers have ample pollen and nectar for honeybees and native pollinators as well," says Marilyn Barlow, president and founder of Select Seeds in Union. "Native flowers, especially, are ideally matched with the native pollinators in a region. We as gardeners can do our part by growing these flowers because they have a lot to offer."

Charming, inexpensive and full of rich local history, seed packets are a welcome sight on my kitchen table. Next week, we'll get some advice and insights from seed professionals on selecting, using and storing seed.

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