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## [Review of] *Saving Seeds, Preserving Taste: Heirloom Seed Savers in Appalachia*

Julene L. Jones

University of Kentucky, [julene.jones@uky.edu](mailto:julene.jones@uky.edu)

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*Saving Seeds, Preserving Taste: Heirloom Seed Savers in Appalachia*, by Bill Best, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013. 200 pp. \$22.95 (paper). ISBN: 9780821420492.

Reviewed by  
Julene L. Jones  
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This book is an engaging anecdotal documentation of seed-saving practices and a campaign to preserve them. In the first part, Dr. Bill Best, a retired Berea College professor and administrator and a well-known seed saver for over fifty years, outlines the culture of seed saving in the Appalachian region and the development of his own seed-saving practices as his legacy to future gardeners. In contrast to the emphasis modern agriculture places on the uniformity of its products for mechanized harvesting and hardiness for transport and shelf life, Dr. Best finds it difficult to tell the story of Appalachian foodways without telling personal ones of his own family: He discovered his late mother's bean seeds in a freezer thirteen years after her death, and subsequently planted the still-viable saved seeds; of his community of dedicated seed-savers who share their seeds and their stories with him; as well as the land of the Appalachians, whose biodiverse climate has effectively localized heirlooms. The latter third of the book contains a variety of portraits, photographs, and personal accounts of seed savers known to Best, and charmingly describes a myriad of heirloom varieties of beans, primarily, but also of tomatoes, apples, corn, candy roasters, and cucumbers and the efforts that seed savers have made to obtain and retain them. Reminiscent of the Foxfire volumes, these informal essays document the earnest efforts of local gardeners and founders of seed banks who have realized that that once long-standing varieties are quickly being lost or discarded, including one portrait of a gardener and reenactor who established a colonial kitchen garden at a Kentucky state park, another of an Air Force veteran who grew his grandmother's heirloom seeds while stationed overseas in Greece, and many others of those who are seeking or who have found and maintained remembered plant varieties.

Best's position is that seeds are not a commodity, but a connection to past, to "true" fruits and vegetables sought after by those chasing a remembered taste from their childhood. As he writes, "most often seeds are seen as a unifying and even uplifting force within a family, a way of keeping in touch with dispersed family members and honoring one's lineage. So it is with great pleasure that I have often been the recipient of a family's treasured seeds whose keepers want them to be shared with others" (128). Heirloom seeds are frequently described by the gardeners as a "treasure" (144), requiring reverence and responsible handling. At age seven, one subject was given what he judged "the best gift ever" when his grandmother gave him a jar of her saved seeds (166) and he plans to do the same for his grandchildren. Another seed-saver is quoted: "While I own and have read many books on heirlooms, there is no substitute for talking to the people who have grown them for years and saved their seed" (173). This book documents that invaluable conversation.

Unique and nearly forgotten heirloom varieties are returning to popularity, as Best attests from his widely popular stall at the Lexington farmer's market, and heirloom seeds are still available at seed swaps in the surrounding Kentucky counties. In addition, Best now makes available many of the varieties of beans and tomatoes mentioned in this book at his not-for-profit seed bank, the Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center, Inc., found at [www.heirlooms.org](http://www.heirlooms.org). At least eight other regional seed saving conservancies are mentioned throughout the book, though no comprehensive list is included separately.

Practically all of the commercially available food in the United States is propagated by corporations who control not only its development, production, and industrialization but also have persuaded consumers that hybridized plants are better than heirlooms because of their alleged disease resistance, and their product's uniformity and shelf stability. Because hybridized seeds are produced to grow almost anywhere, they are the polar opposite of saved heirloom seeds. The definition of an "heirloom" varies, but Best describes it as an open pollinated variety of a plant that contains the taste

remembered from childhood, a seed or graft that breeds true to its parent and connects the gardener or eater to history. The priority for heirlooms according to the seed savers is taste in the form of edible nostalgia, not shelf stability, simultaneous ripening, disease resistance, uniformity, high yield, or marketability. Heirlooms are grown not only “for flavor but also the memories” (170), and as Howard Sacks writes in his foreword, “[e]xchanging seeds clearly produces more than food; it is an act of profound social meaning, nurturing community and family bonds” (xi).

Without using their vocabulary, Best crafts a simple yet passionate argument for the slow food and locavore movements. Throughout the book, seed savers repeatedly cite the same reasons for saving seeds: As a performance of cultural identity, they contain cultural and familial history, and are an accessible resistance against modern agri-industries. Literally, seeds are saved from varieties of plants that are no longer deemed important to large-scale, monoculture commercial agriculture. By describing the culture surrounding seed saving and seed savers, Best presents the case for fresh, sustainable produce, connection to the land, consciousness of the bounty and diversity found in nature, as well as discourses surrounding family, community, and history.

This book fills a void of information about specific Appalachian heirlooms, seed saving practices and those who save seed in an informal way and describes the growth of the seed-saver movement, person by person, one seed at a time from a fellow gardener in a chance meeting, at an organized seed swap, or through an order placed at a seed bank. Suitable for undergraduates and gardeners looking for inspiration, this nostalgic portrait of lifelong seed savers entrusts and documents their practices of Appalachian seed saving to and for future generations looking for accessible resistance: Anyone can save a seed.