

"What makes a plant an heirloom is age accompanied by sturdiness."

-- Judy Barrett



Heirloom plants, l to r, 'Henri Martin' antique rose, 'Mortgage Lifter' tomato and 'Becks Big Buck Horn' okra, (Some photos by Judy Barrett)

PLANTS CAN BE ANTIQUES TOO!

By Judy Barret

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Like cut glass and quilts, old plants are treasure often passed from generation to generation. The renewed interest in heirloom plants is steadily growing. Gardeners remember with fondness flowers in Grandmother's garden or vegetables Grandfather harvested.

What makes a plant an heirloom is age accompanied by sturdiness. Heirloom plants have survived for generations, in spite of drought, unseasonable cold, too much rain, and too many bugs. Some heirlooms are specific to a place and conditions that exist there. Many Native American farmers grow a variety of corn grown on family lands for hundreds of years. This corn, has become specifically adapted to those conditions.



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Other heirlooms thrive in a variety of climates. 'Henri Martin,' for example, is an antique rose that tolerates both Texas heat and Minnesota freezes. This year the only tomato that flourished in my garden was 'Maine Tomato berry,' an heirloom native from Maine (sold for a while as a Texas wild tomato!).

Generally, hybrid (new) plants favored by commercial growers produce earlier, bigger, longer-keeping fruit or flower. But to meet those needs, they often give up delicacy, fragrance, and flavor.

Old-fashioned plants have not been hybridized by plant breeders. They have naturally evolved, adapting to conditions in which they live. Usually they are natural hybrids whose ancestry is lost to the wind that bred them.

Heirloom varieties are available in many different kinds of plants, antique roses, annuals and perennial flowers, garden bulbs. In the right environment, they generally easy to grow, adaptable, and reproduce reliably.

The characteristic I particularly enjoy about heirloom varieties is their connectedness with people, the stories that are so rich in lore and humanity:

- [Mortgage Lifter tomato](#), so called because the crop was so big and wonderful, the farmer was able to pay off the mortgage on the farm.
- [Beck's Okra \(Malcolm Beck, founder of Garden-Ville in San Antonio\)](#). This variety came to Texas from Germany via a smuggler who hid seeds in his boots all the way across the Atlantic. Malcolm Beck is often credited as being the Father of Organic Gardening in Texas.
- Blush Noisette and Parson's Yellow antique roses grew in Empress Josephine's garden.

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*Antique roses, l to r, Blush Noisette 1814, Parson's Pink and ' Tausendschön' rose
(with author Judy and her mother Stella.*

An antique Tausendschön climbing rose grew on the back trellis at my Mother's house for as long as I can remember. The original rose is gone. Mother is gone. Even the house is gone, but I've still got the rose and it warms my heart each spring when it burst into joyous bloom. Tausendschön means Thousand Beauties. Almost every gardener has a plant or two that came from another's garden--and usually there is a story that goes with the plant. It is this melding of story and plant that I love--especially since these plants are almost always easy to grow, smell good, and are beautiful.

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