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May

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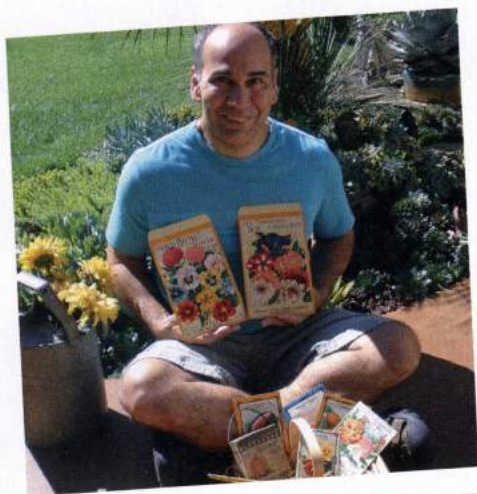
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THE COLLECTOR SEED PACKETS

Words: JULIAN OWEN



DWAYNE ROGERS' INTEREST IN FOOD AND SEED LABELS MADE HIM AN EXPERT IN PACKET DESIGN. NOW HE MAKES HIS LIVING SELLING THEM TO FELLOW ENTHUSIASTS

Trace a line on a map heading north-east of San Francisco, Sacramento, and on. Draw another out due west of Lake Tahoe on the California/Nevada border. Where the lines intersect, deep in the lush California interior, you'll find Placer County. "The gold rush area," says Dwayne Rogers. "It used to be an idyllic spot where there were rolling hills, 40-acre farm ranches, country roads, and when blossoms bloomed the smell was really good." Dwayne was raised here, on farming land that was originally bought by his grandfather in 1917. Fertile ground for food packet and, later, seed packet collecting. "I keep them in a baseball card album," he says, "probably have about a thousand. It's kinda crazy."

Before seeds, though, there was produce. "We raised our own meat," Dwayne explains in a voice as soft as it is swift. "With hindsight you know the difference, but I didn't realise how much better grass-fed meat was. And I'd go out every day and pick handfuls of stuff: cucumbers, squash, tomatoes, and we'd can everything from figs to dill pickles. Whatever was out there, my mom would cook something. There might be extra turnips, so we'd have turnip soup. We never threw anything out."

When Dwayne turned 18, his father retired and the farm was sold. "Things had started changing, and we had one of the last orchards. A lot of farmland had moved down to the valley, with deeper soil and

an earlier season, because it was warmer." It must have been pretty tough, being uprooted from a childhood idyll? "Looking back, it was really special," says Dwayne, "but you're confined. Everybody I knew was out playing during the summer, and I was working in the orchard. I was glad to get out."

He stayed close to the soil, becoming a shipping point inspector for the California Department of Agriculture. "That's how I started collecting. Other »

For Dwayne, one of the appeals of seed packets is following the progress of the original designs, commissioned from professional artists in the 1910s and 1920s. Many of them are still used today; only printing methods have changed





Dwayne's flower seed packets hook collectors with the sheer range of species there are to fossick for, and the olde worlde appeal of their quaint names: Burt's, Everitt's and, Dwayne's favourite, Rice's

inspectors were label collectors, and I thought 'This is kind of fun' – it was the competition, the chase, as we moved from location to location. Basically we were fruit tramps. You'd start as early as March in the warmest areas, and work your way up the state to the cooler climates and later crops, all the way into November. All that time we'd be looking for crate labels, and I was looking for seed packets, too."

As you might expect of a man rooted generations deep in California farming, at times the collecting became personal. "Back in the 1910s there were a lot of small orchards, family farms, and if they were big enough they'd have their own labels. My dad would find these labels and knew the farmers. One time I found one that was a distant cousin of ours."

While Dwayne isn't sure which seed packet is his oldest – "a best guess is the 1900s" – age isn't really

the point; it's the quality, the variety. "Major companies may have 3,000 different packets, every type of vegetable or flower you can think of. A lot of the designs were done in the 1910s, 1920s, by professional artists. Companies kept a lot of their images, you still see them. It's the printing process that's changed, from very detailed stone lithograph to offset printing to maybe photo mechanical, and now mechanical."

It is a world of evocative names – Burt's, Huth, Everitt's, Burpee, and Dwayne's favourite, Rice's – and timeless appeal. Dwayne relates how the Card Seed Company had gone out of business in Indianapolis in the 1920s, all but forgotten until their old warehouse caught ablaze. "It had sat idle for all these years, then fire came through and someone stumbled over the packets – some still have smoke