

Renee's Garden Seeds

“April in Paris’ smells like orange blossoms with a hint of honeysuckle,” Renee Shepherd, founder of Renee’s Garden Seeds, tells me. She means the sweet pea cultivar, not the city, though you might not guess the distinction based on the list of countries she’s visited during her 25 years in the seed business.

“I look for cultivars where they come from — basil from Italy, kale from Holland.” In her search for heirloom and open-pollinated cultivars, she’s traveled to Poland, Hungary, England, Japan, and Brazil, to name a few. The result of these travels is the Renee’s Garden Seeds catalog, with cultivars curated by Renee and cultivated by a wide range of seed growers across the country and the world.

Because her company is “totally devoted to home gardeners,” Renee grows and eats the cultivars she sells in her own garden and kitchen. The experience of fresh bouquets and home-cooked meals is a vital part of her company.

“The connection between cooking and gardening drives selection,” Renee says. To that end, she looks for cultivars that are vigorous, disease-resistant, and delicious. The synergy between flavor and performance is tested for two seasons in the company’s two trial gardens — one in Santa Cruz, California and the other in Middlebury, Vermont — before a new cultivar is added to Renee’s seed catalog.

Among her favorite cultivars are ‘Clarimore,’ a buttery Lebanese zucchini, and ‘Astia,’ a container zucchini. Renee has kept a close eye on growing trends over the decades, and she’s found that container cultivars are becoming ever more popular. Bred to be more compact, these cultivars can be planted densely to optimize small growing spaces. Renee’s 2018 catalog will include new container cultivars of spinach, zucchini, tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers.

There’s more than seeds growing at Renee’s. “Education is an extension of our seed packets,” she says. “I want people to be successful with our seeds, so I try to provide everything I can to help them.” If the detailed growing information on each seed packet doesn’t answer your questions, you can call the full-time horticultural advisor at Renee’s, or browse the volumes of articles on the website’s resources page.

Renee’s Garden Seeds donates seed packets to organizations and educational programs around the world, with a special emphasis on growing food for the hungry. “Donation and fundraising are part of the reason I’m in business. Being in the seed business lets you do a lot of good.” Renee says.

The company also offers a fundraising program for nonprofits and community groups. From programs in Uganda, Rwanda, and Nicaragua to the local university where Renee’s is based in Santa Cruz, California, the seeds and fundraising program have helped grow school gardens, community gardens, and prison gardens, sowing social justice through sustainable food.