



THE Generous Gardener



**RENEE'S GARDEN SPREADS
THE WORD OF GARDENING
AND GOOD SEED.**

By Jim Long

IT'S NO EXAGGERATION to say Renee Shepherd's passion is gardening. She gets as excited over a robust winter squash or an ancient variety of mint as many people do over sports. Not that she's any stranger to sports, either.

In the 1980s she mowed a pasture next to her house to create room for a soccer field for weekly neighborhood soccer matches. The connections she made on the soccer field had a lasting impact on future events in her life.

One of the players who joined her Sunday soccer games was a Dutch seedsman, Case Boonman (now CEO of Chicago-based Ball Horticultural Company). Back then he represented a large Dutch vegetable seed company and shared a few varieties of gourmet garden seed with Renee, along with seed from his home country of the Netherlands and a few French heirlooms.

Renee was so impressed by the varieties, which were unlike anything being grown in the United States at the time, that she (literally) mortgaged her house and started a seed company. Shepherd is now widely known for being a pioneer in introducing unique specialty vegetables and herbs to home gardeners and gourmet restaurants.

Shepherd is a dynamo, constantly in motion. She's actively involved in her community, serving on the County Planning Commission, and hits the trail on her Quarter Horse, "Patches" whenever she can. The house she mortgaged to build the seed business is the same one she still lives in today, set on four acres just outside Santa Cruz, Calif.

Renee is almost as passionate about good food as she is

about gardening. Her gardens are her inspiration and she's always cooking up new recipes with her varieties, making jellies, sauces, pickles and anything else that strikes her fancy. Many of her recipes evolve into cookbooks—two so far, *Recipes from a Kitchen Garden* and *More Recipes from a Kitchen Garden*, with a third one on the way.

NEW GENERATION

A new, younger generation of gardeners is on the horizon, says Shepherd. Her newest customer demographic are folks aged 25 to 35. "A tremendously symbolic boost to seed and gardening businesses was in 2009 when Michelle Obama planted the garden at the White House and promoted local farmers markets," she says. "Vegetable seed sales jumped nearly 35 percent that year."

When asked about what changes she's seen in the seed business in the past dozen or so years, she indicates there's lots more interest in gourmet vegetable varieties, heirlooms, container gardens and flowers for cutting.

"Before 2009, flowers and vegetable seed sales were about even for me," says Shepherd,

"but since that time, vegetable seed far outsells flowers. This new generation of gardeners is also having an impact. There's a new interest in local food, farmers markets and fresh, healthy food, and that's helping seed companies nationwide."

UPLIFTING OTHERS

Renee Shepherd likes to give back to the community, and she sees the community as more than her local neighborhood. She is generous in giving seeds to the National Gardening Association's school garden projects and donates seeds to schools in the United States, Honduras, Nigeria, and Uganda. She created a schools and nonprofits fundraising program, by which schools and nonprofits encourage other gardeners to buy Renee's Garden seed through their newsletter or website. Twenty-five percent of all sales go directly back to the school or nonprofit for their own projects.

She also hosts an annual online photo contest and makes substantial seed donations to a wide range of gardening-related causes. Her special interests are in community garden projects,

especially in urban "food deserts" where these programs provide fresh vegetables to people who otherwise have little access to fresh food. She also promotes gardening as living classrooms in schools and participates in seed donations to prison gardens that teach employable horticultural skills to build productive lives.

RELIABLE SEED

Renee's Garden seeds are sold through independent garden centers and nurseries and directly online to gardeners at www.reneesgarden.com. She maintains trial gardens in California, Seattle, Vermont, and Florida and she trials every selection before offering it to the gardening public. Her seed packets are beautifully illustrated with watercolors of each variety painted from the trial garden. Renee has been working with the same artist for the seed packets for more than 20 years.

Renee's Garden prides itself on the very specific growing, harvesting and use instructions for each seed variety, which she writes herself based on growing experience in her trial gardens. Every packet has the customer service e-mail address where gardeners can ask

LEFT: Renee Shepherd's joy is promoting gardening, and she's constantly looking for new ways to do it.

BELOW: A selection of Renee's Garden colorful seed packets.





LEFT: Shepherd maintains trial gardens in California, Seattle, Vermont, and Florida and she trials every selection before offering it to the gardening public.

questions and be assured that Beth Benjamin, the company's horticultural advisor, will respond to the customer's specific question.

Shepherd doesn't introduce a new seed variety unless she's truly excited about it. Her Portuguese Tronchuda Beira Kale, a heat-tolerant European variety with wide, white and tender stems, and especially sweet leaves, is a good example; a variety she touts as one of the best-tasting, best-producing kales available.

Shepherd searches world-wide for unusual heirloom seeds. "Our varieties are selected from growers we know and trust in the United States, Holland, England, Italy, France, Germany, Hungary, Canada, Mexico, Chile, Thailand, Japan, China, and New Zealand. All of our seeds are carefully trialed and evaluated in our test gardens in different climate zones before we offer them in our catalog and are guaranteed reliable in every major U.S. climate zone," says Shepherd. One of her recent introductions is her Wasabi Arugula. This new strain of rustic arugula has the same spicy taste as Japanese wasabi and she says, "It's been a real hit!"

RAINBOW OF COLORS

What Renee's Garden may be best known for, however, is her unique way of combining seed varieties, which she calls her Rainbow packets. An example is her Zucchini "Tricolor Mix," in which one packet contains color-coded seeds of three different zucchinis: dark green, pastel green, and golden yellow varieties. Her "Summer Scallop Trio" contains seeds for three different colored pattypan squashes. "Crispy Colors Duo" kohlrabi is a mix of green and purple kohlrabi and her "Summer Bouquet" Lettuce Trio is a blend of Dutch and French specialty lettuces, equal parts of red, green, and rusty-pink varieties.

You'll find those rainbow combinations in a whole range of her seed varieties, which is great for the home gardener. Instead of having to buy three kinds of seed, you can try them all from one packet!

Renee's Garden offers a full selection of open-pollinated, heirloom and garden-worthy hybrid varieties. "We do not sell treated or genetically engineered seeds and have signed the 'Safe Seed Pledge' developed by The Council for Responsible Genetics," says Shepherd.

"We work hard to offer great-tasting varieties that grow reliably everywhere because I want gardeners to be pleased and successful with our seeds," Shepherd states. "My life's joy is promoting gardening, and that's what we concentrate on here at Renee's Garden." 🌱

JIM LONG writes from Long Creek Herbs Farm in the Missouri Ozarks.



Find her:

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—RENEE SHEPHERD