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60 A GARDENING LIFE

Seedswoman Renee Shepherd

by Hazel White



It was soccer that got Renee Shepherd into the seed business. In the mid-1980s, while she was completing a PhD (in the history of consciousness) at University of California, Santa Cruz, she mowed a pasture alongside her house to make a soccer field. Case Boonman, a Dutch seedsman (now president of Ball Horticultural) came to the regular Sunday morning games and potluck lunches. At that time, he worked for a Dutch company that sold seeds of varieties bred to meet the quality and flavor expectations of daily customers in European produce markets. Shepherd grew some in her garden and loved them. “Those truly wonderful varieties were not available then, and I thought if I like them that well, then I want to share them with other people,” she says. And so, “I mortgaged the house and wrote a seed catalog.”

The house, in which she still lives, is nestled on four acres in the San Lorenzo Valley north of Santa Cruz, on the edge of a state park where Shepherd rides her two horses, Patches and Ruby. On the kitchen counter sit posies of Renee’s Garden (reeneesgarden.com), superlative old-fashioned flowers, including, lately, Zinfandel sweet peas (the latest of 26 stunning sweet pea varieties she has collected from the United States, England, and New Zealand). On her desk lies the finished manuscript of her third cookbook. The larder is stocked with applesauce, cinnamon basil jelly, spiced brandied peaches, hot chili oil, and lots of pickles. She makes enough to give away to visitors, with a bunch of home-grown dried lavender.

Being a seedswoman and food writer suits Shepherd because she enjoys the connections she makes with people all over the world, particularly the breeders and small organic growers. They share her passion and, like her, they know a lot. A morning may find her tracking down a thick-walled pimento pepper in Hungary—talking to the seed company that has the seeds, but also to Hungarians who can tell her how they use it, whether it can be dried, how it is traditionally cooked. “There’s all this history and culture that goes with things

you eat,” she says. “The seed business is a way of hand-holding back through generations—that’s what I most enjoy about seeds.”

What motivates her most, though, are her customers. Shepherd usually speaks so fast that she knows people find it hard to understand her, but now she hesitates. “I’ve always had a strange affinity for plants and their health and happiness,” she says. “I think good gardeners are that way. You get in tune with plants, which, after all, are living beings too.” She thinks she doesn’t articulate it well, but

she knows gardening is a basic human need. “It makes you notice the beauty. It slows you down, connects you with things,” she ventures, “especially gardening from seeds. Re-experiencing the miracle of life over and over again—it gives you appreciation and patience for life.” She thinks all humans should witness that; it is her life’s goal to help ensure as many as possible do.

Shepherd donates seeds to community and school gardens in the United States, Honduras, Nigeria, and Uganda. She is on the board of the National Gardening Association; she also lectures widely. But her strategy for creating more gardeners relies on selling her customers top-quality seeds of the best flowers, vegetables, and herbs in the world. “I want to sell the highest possibility for total success and satisfaction,” she says.

To that end, Shepherd grows and evaluates 250 to 300 varieties of seed each year from Asia, Europe, and South and North America in trial gardens on her four acres. She has a good eye for what other people enjoy. This past spring, she was excited about a little butter yellow wallflower that blooms in its first year from seed and smells like baby powder; a viola that looks like a giant Johnny-jump-up, and an 18-inch-tall, deep blue, fruity-smelling lavender, “French Perfume.” As always, she’ll write the Renee’s Garden seed packet descriptions and growing information herself. “My job,” she sums up, “is to find wonderful things and share them with other people. I’m a transfer vehicle. That’s my job.” ■

Seeds~ Woman Renee Shepherd