

Organic begins with seed

By Barbara Damrosch, *The Washington Post* Wednesday, January 30, 2013

A seed purveyor needs to be right on top of the trends, and Renee Shepherd is no exception. She sells seed packets to home gardeners online at Reneesgarden.com and through gardening retailers. The “hot new trends” she identifies in her spring media kit include heirlooms, rainbow vegetables, container plants and ones that nurture beneficial insects. Leading the list is organic seed, of which she has a new line.



Beets grown from organic seeds from Renee's Garden.

She's not alone. Most sellers highlight their organic varieties, alerting farmers for whom organic seed is necessary for organic certification. But the demand from home gardeners is growing. What's behind that? If you grow a plant organically, why does the tiny speck you start with have to be organic, too?

Aside from the disconcerting pink coloration of pea and bean seeds treated with chemical fungicide, the issue isn't the seed itself as it drops into your furrow. (Seed treatment might be appropriate for seeds like peas and beans that are prone to damping off, and some companies now use nontoxic coatings.) It has more to do with how the seed was grown and how it will grow for you.

Vegetables and herbs for seed harvest spend more time in the ground than those for eating. That means more time for them to be sprayed with pesticides and other pollutants — practices less restricted for seed crops. So growing organic seed is much better for the soil, the water and the air. Some shoppers surely make that connection.

But there's another part of the puzzle that's a little more subtle. Traditional heirloom seed varieties are favored by organic growers not only because they often have better flavor, and because growing them helps to preserve seed diversity, but also because they were developed over the years in conjunction with nonchemical practices. Modern hybrids, on the other hand, were bred in conjunction with industrial agriculture and its use of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers high in soluble nitrogen.

With the renewed popularity of organic produce and organic methods, some breeders are looking at the subject again and developing varieties — including hybrids — for organic production. This isn't that hard to do. For example, if you see a tomato in a catalogue advertised as a “greenhouse tomato,” it's been bred to withstand the moisture in a greenhouse. Similarly, if it's been bred as an organic variety, it's more likely to resist certain diseases that ordinarily beset tomatoes in an organic garden or field. Bravo for that! Buying organic seeds supports that kind of research.



Squash grown from organic seeds from Renee's Garden.