

# A Passion *for* Seeds



Introducing American gardeners to seeds for beautiful and delicious varieties of vegetables, herbs, and flowers is Renee Shepherd's enduring legacy.

BY NAN STERMAN

**T**O REACH Renee Shepherd's California mountain home, one takes a long driveway past beds of eggplant and cucumbers, then past a paddock inhabited by three beautiful horses.

The home's entry garden, designed by Shepherd's good friend and legendary edible landscape designer Rosalind Creasy, is filled with blood-red poppies, golden yellow coreopsis, purple sages, bronze-and-

**Annuals, perennials, and vines mingle in the colorful cottage-style entry garden around Renee Shepherd's California home, top. Shepherd, shown above with her yellow lab, Eliot, is the founder and owner of Renee's Garden seed company.**

yellow blanket flowers, stark white Shasta daisies, and dusky pink Peruvian lilies.

The front path leads past a cobalt-blue ceramic vase overflowing with a gentle trickle of water. It marks the entry to an outdoor dining room beneath a peaked metal arbor. Grapevines clamber up and over the arbor, shading a metal table and chairs, typical except for their colors: primary red, buttercup yellow, and periwinkle blue.

Shepherd, founder and owner of Renee's Garden seed company, welcomes

visitors at her door. A petite woman with short brown hair, she has a fierce intellect and keen business acumen. She's equally comfortable searching the world for seeds of the perfect, personal-sized kabocha squash, or sitting at her computer writing a detailed and inspiring description of a new variety of Vietnamese cilantro that has frilly leaves and a flavor that finishes with a hint of lemon.

## SOCCER AND SEEDS

Growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, Shepherd didn't garden at home, but she remembers with fondness weekends spent at her grandmother's house, where she and her grandmother worked in the garden together and then her grandmother used freshly harvested vegetables to prepare their lunch.

In the 1980s, she relocated to work on a doctorate in the history of consciousness at the University of California—Santa Cruz. Around that time, she bought a ranch-style home on four acres in Felton, a small town in the redwoods, about 20 minutes east of the university.

While in graduate school, Shepherd often invited fellow graduate students for weekend potlucks and games of soccer in the field below her horse pasture. Few American students were familiar with the game, so Shepherd invited European graduate students, all of whom knew how to play soccer.

Among the Europeans she met was Cees Boonman, who at the time worked for a seed company that sold Dutch seed varieties to farmers in the nearby agricultural community of Salinas, euphemistically known as “the Salad Bowl of the World.”

One day, Boonman—who went on to make his own name in the seed industry and is now president of the Ball Seed Company—made a comment that changed Shepherd's life. “I had a small vegetable garden,” she says. “When he looked at it, in typical straightforward Dutch fashion, he said, ‘This is all junk. These varieties aren't at all as good as what we have in the Netherlands.’” The Dutch, he informed her, shop for vegetables three or four times a week, and flavor is very important. “He told me the varieties in my garden just didn't live up to that standard and said, ‘Would you like to try some of ours?’”

The European varieties opened Shepherd's eyes to a whole new world of vegetables and herbs. At that time, vegetables were

perceived more as a commodity, valued for production and shipability, not for flavor. It struck her that other American gardeners would enjoy them as well, but there were no European seeds available to them at the time. So in 1985, Shepherd took the bold step of starting her first seed business, Shep-



“Rosette” tatsoi, top, is a new offering from Renee's Garden for 2015. ‘Watermelon’ heirloom Asian radish, above, is an older favorite introduced in the 2011 catalog.

herd's Garden Seeds, a mailorder company. “Today, we have wonderful vegetables in the U.S., and wonderful cooks,” explains Shepherd, “but back then, I was the only one selling a lot of specialty seeds like arugula, radicchio, mesclun, and baby kale.”

It may seem surprising for an academician to launch a seed business, but Shep-

herd's graduate experience played a big role in the evolution of her passion. Starting in the late 1960s, UC—Santa Cruz became a hotbed for all things sustainable. It was an exciting time of innovation that saw the birth of sustainable agriculture, the precursor to today's permaculture movement. It also spawned the “back to the land” movement in which many people tried their hands at simple living based in environmental consciousness. And that, of course, included growing one's own food.

The university hired English master gardener Alan Chadwick in 1967 to create a student garden. Chadwick developed a highly successful teaching garden where he introduced organic Biodynamic/French Intensive growing methods to hundreds of eager and enthusiastic students. Shepherd's studies were in a cross-disciplinary program, so many of Chadwick's students were her colleagues and she shared their interest in environmental studies. She even taught classes in the Environmental Studies department.

## SHARED WISDOM AND FIRST STEPS

Before starting Shepherd's Garden Seeds, Shepherd sought advice from several successful business owners. “I called up Rob Johnston at Johnny's [Selected Seeds] and Steve Solomon, who owned Territorial [Seed Company], Will Raap, who started Gardener's Supply [Company], and asked them about the seed business,” Shepherd recalls, smiling at the memory. “Since I wasn't in their geographic regions, I wasn't a competitor. Besides, they are wonderful and generous people, so they gave me their advice.”

Her first step was to write a catalog. “I thought gardeners and people who like to cook would like these varieties,” she says, “so I wrote as if I were talking to you.”

“Renee is very articulate and literate,” says Wendy Krupnick, who for close to a decade ran Shepherd's test garden, where she grew new varieties and witnessed the development of Shepherd's approach. “Her descriptions and the way she writes about varieties is part of what makes her business successful. She describes varieties in a way that makes your mouth water.”

While learning the seed business, Shepherd also honed her own gardening skills under the tutelage of local organic gardeners. As much as she was interested in vegetables, old-fashioned flowers al-

so caught her attention. As she explains, “Here in Santa Cruz, there was an organic farm called Camp Joy, and the people who ran it really knew their flowers.” One of the Camp Joy’s founders was a woman named Beth Benjamin, who became a friend and now works for Shepherd. “Beth helped me learn about flowers, which became a lifelong fascination,” she says. Her interest in herbs came from a seed-buying trip to Italy, where she was fascinated to discover that every region had a slightly different variety of basil.

*“The lovely semi-double blossoms of this tropical-looking pastel variety seem to float over the pretty rounded green leaves that remind us of water lilies.”*

*Renee’s Garden catalog description for ‘Buttercream’ nasturtium*

Shepherd was soon traveling to seed trials in France and other countries to learn about each region’s specialties. Her attendance at seed trials was unusual in two respects: First, she was a woman in the male-dominated industry; second, seed trials were traditionally the purview of buyers and brokers, not retailers. Shepherd and her staff tasted each variety, too—something no one else did. Krupnick recalls going to seed open houses in nearby Salinas Valley. “We’d do field walks, and we were the only ones bending over and breaking off leaves to eat,” she says. “The men would chuckle at us, but we thought (tasting the varieties) was the point.”

Rosalind Creasy adds, “Good food, local food doesn’t have to be grown that way. Renee came along with her cooking ability and the ability to change things.” Shepherd, Creasy says, reconnected food with flavor.

In 1988, Shepherd made a strategic decision to sell Shepherd’s Garden Seeds to White Flower Farm, a top-tier perennial mailorder company. White Flower Farm had a huge fulfillment facility in Connecticut that was busy during the spring to fall perennial season but quiet during seed-selling

season. By combining their operations, the two companies could increase their efficiency. The sales agreement allowed Shepherd to continue running the seed side of the operation from California. “They fulfilled all the orders while I was given free rein to develop the seed business,” she explains.

After the acquisition, Shepherd grew Shepherd’s Garden Seed catalog rapidly, including the addition of live plants. In the meantime, Shepherd says she learned

and started Renee’s Garden in 1998. She took a different approach to the business model with Renee’s Garden, which she describes as “an online company that sells seeds to garden centers and nurseries, and to home gardeners.” Shepherd’s Garden Seeds was, by comparison, “a mailorder catalog company in the heyday of catalogs.”

The business plan may have changed, but not Shepherd’s drive to search out



how to run a business from White Flower Farm owner Eliot Wadsworth. “I am very grateful for that,” she says.

## NEW BEGINNING

By 1996, Shepherd decided to focus more on seeds, so she left White Flower Farm

## Resources

**More Recipes From a Kitchen Garden** by Renee Shepherd and Fran Raboff. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA, 1995.

**Recipes from a Kitchen Garden** by Renee Shepherd and Fran Raboff. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA, 1994.

**The Renee’s Garden Cookbook** by Renee Shepherd and Fran Raboff. Shepherd Garden Publishing, Felton, CA, 2014.

the best-tasting, easiest-to-grow, and most productive varieties from across the globe. Thailand, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Great Britain, France, Italy, Brazil, the Netherlands, Belgium, Czech Republic, Canada, the United States, Mexico, Israel, and New Zealand are countries Shepherd lists off the top of her head. Seeds come from a variety of sources, including companies that sell to farmers, those that sell to growers, and companies that produce for the home gardener.

Today, Renee’s Garden sells 5.5 million packets of seeds across the United States and Canada. The company employs 28 people, most of whom work in the company offices, a couple of miles away from Shepherd’s home, near the main crossroads in Felton, a small town in north-central California, just inland from Santa Cruz. Four employees work in the organic test garden that surrounds

Shepherd's home. Every year, they test 350 new varieties. Growing everything at her home first is a crucial component of Shepherd's approach. "I don't sell anything unless I grow it myself," she says, "I want people to be successful and have good results."

The test garden includes numerous raised beds divided between an upper and a lower section. The upper test garden, which surrounds much of her home, contains the smaller crops, those that need most protection from birds, or just a watchful eye.

Alongside the raised beds are beautiful deep blue and green ceramic pots brimming with beans, tomatoes, and other candidates for Renee's Garden's container vegetable collection.

Eliot, Shepherd's yellow lab, follows faithfully as Shepherd leads the way to the lower trial garden near the barn. Shepherd stops to nuzzle her three handsome horses in the paddock next to the garden fence. In her free time, Shepherd enjoys riding her horses around town and on trails through the surrounding redwood forest. "I'm very interested in



**Shepherd's test garden offers her the chance to trial new plant varieties, such as this "Prinz" celeriac, a relative of celery prized for its crisp, rounded roots.**

the natural horsemanship approach to riding," she says.

Past the horses and into the lower trial garden area, one finds larger scale vegetables and beds of mixed flowers. By mid-summer, there are tomatoes from eastern

Europe, peppers in different shapes and colors, enormous savoy cabbages, cauliflower, eggplant, and squash, just to name a few.

Shepherd is so well known for her vegetables and herbs that it is easy to overlook her passion for old-fashioned flowering annuals, perennials, and vines. She has a particular affinity for fragrant plants, including sweet peas, of which Renee's Garden offers more than 25 varieties.

One edge of this large, fenced-in garden is lined with tall, purple-flowering *Buddleia* that draws butterflies to the garden. Plants that attract beneficial insects, including butterflies and other pollinators, are another of Shepherd's big interests. One long test bed is given over to pollinator seed mixes that include various formulations of blue cornflowers, pink cosmos, yellow and red coreopsis, orange marigolds, magenta clarkias, and red zinnias. Cover crop mixes fill another bed, some of which will soon appear as Renee's Garden offerings.

Varieties that do well in Shepherd's home test garden are then trialed at a student-run garden at Middlebury College in Vermont. Each variety must perform well in both locations to be considered for the catalog, says Shepherd.

### CREATING A DISTINCTIVE BRAND

Over the years, Shepherd has brought a number of innovations to the seed business. Among the first was her "rainbow" packets of seed, each of which includes three varieties of the same vegetable; eggplant, tomato, or pepper. Each variety of seed is dyed a different color so gardeners can tell which are which. "I got the idea," Shepherd says "one day when I was coloring Easter eggs." A legend on seed packets decodes the colors.

Renee's Garden seed packets are widely regarded as among the best in the industry. "Unlike many seed companies, which simply offer generic information that is basically the same on every packet, Renee's packets include specific details about germinating,

**Blanketflowers (*Gaillardia* sp.) and other colorful plants grow in the cottage garden at the entry to Shepherd's home.**



growing, and using that particular plant variety,” says Jim Long, owner of Long Creek Herbs in Blue Eye, Missouri. “The beautiful illustrations are a real bonus because they often show more detail than a photograph.”

Shepherd writes all of the packet material herself, incorporating observations from the test gardens and from her own kitchen. In addition to the mouth-watering descriptions, each seed packet features a beautiful watercolor portrait of the vegetable, flower, or herb, created by San Francisco Bay area artist Mimi Osborne. Shepherd added an extra flap to the envelopes to allow for a detailed description of each variety, its flavor, and how it



**Renee's Garden's seed packets feature watercolor illustrations by artist Mimi Osborne.**

grows—along with the seed color legend for rainbow seed mixes. Open the flap to find instructions on how to start the seeds, growing notes, and harvest and use. Along one edge is a key for when, where, and how deep to space or plant, plant height and width, days to germination, and so on. The same information and illustrations can be found on her company website ([www.reneesgarden.com](http://www.reneesgarden.com)).



Accompanied by her dog, Eliot, Renee Shepherd waters a bed of seedlings in the test garden that surrounds her home. Shepherd personally evaluates all the trial plants under consideration for her catalog, testing them not only in the gardens, but in her kitchen.

In addition to writing the catalog and seed packet information, Shepherd has three cookbooks to her credit, including the recently released *Renee's Garden Cookbook*, (see “Resources,” page 22).

Vegetable gardening, like everything else, has trends with Shepherd often at the cutting edge. Right now, she says, kale is the “hot” vegetable “because of its incredible health values and because it’s overtaking roasted beets in salads.” She is also seeing more interest in vegetables that can be grown in containers, and in root vegetables, which she says have become popular with chefs. Cilantro “seems to have overtaken basil as the best-selling herb and flat-leaf Italian parsley is very popular, as well as arugula.”

### PAYING IT FORWARD

Her long career in the seed business has offered Shepherd numerous opportunities for giving back. Krupnick describes Shepherd as “very generous. She’s a dedicated, smart person who sees the business

opportunity but still follows her personal mission of making more gardeners in the world who get joy from growing their own food, flowers, and herbs.” Renee’s Garden donates seeds to school gardens, gardens for homeless people, non-profit gardening organizations, and prison gardens. “I am still doing cultural history—just in a different way,” Shepherd says, “The pleasure of gardening, cooking, and having flowers in your home expands into most aspects of life and makes the world a better place.”

After a moment of reflection, Shepherd adds, “I am one of the most fortunate people in the universe because I get to do what I love. It’s doing well by doing good and doing good to do well.”

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