



editor in the country

Ann's on 'Jury Duty'

Editor Ann Kaiser works at the trial garden where Renee's Garden Seeds are put to the test.

Zinnias—blooming profusely in a riot of colors—are on trial, along with dozens of other flower and vegetable varieties in Renee Shepherd's Felton, California gardens.

Snip...snip, snip. I cut some brilliant red blooms, then several vibrant orange and sun-kissed yellow zinnias as we gather a showy bouquet. Renee is in-

roducing a seed mix to grow this trio of glorious blooms—she's calling it Bright Crayon Colors.

You may have seen Renee's Garden Seeds packets with their pretty watercolor illustrations. They're sold in 900 garden centers coast-to-coast and on her Web site.

Renee is not a seed producer; instead, she tests seed from sources around the world to select the best for home gardeners. "The hallmark of my company," she explains, "is that everything I sell has been grown and proven here in my trial garden."

I'm getting dirt under my nails as a witness...

8:30 a.m.—We turn on and adjust os-

cillating sprinklers to water raised beds of herbs, vegetables and flowers that cover 1/2 acre behind her comfortable home, set on 4 acres.

It's late September, so some of the garden has been put to bed for the season. But leafy greens and herbs are ready to harvest, and germinating sweet peas, sown now for blooms next spring, still need moisture.

"This 'kitchen garden' and another half-acre plot make up my trial garden. We try new seeds, evaluate varieties and compare seeds from different sources. Before I market any seeds—I now sell 250 types of flowers, vegetables and herbs—I grow them here myself for two seasons.

"Using this firsthand experience, along with feedback from other growing zones, I write the seed packet instructions. My mission is to help backyard gardeners be successful and get pleasure

Gardeners trust the flower and vegetable seeds Renee Shepherd (shown at top, right, with Ann) tries and selects.



Photos: Dawn Fortis



Renee Shepherd shows Ann how to set up a seed germination test. At right, they pull back cloth shading a row of pepper plants.



and satisfaction from growing the seeds I select.”

A crew of six helps her with gardening and marketing. “The office” has taken over most of her house.

9 a.m.—Compost is a key for her organic gardening method, and one of several piles in the kitchen garden needs turning. With a pitchfork, I help garden manager Arlene Kozimbo flip the compost into a new stack. “Turning aerates the compost and promotes decomposition,” Renee says. Most of this material is garden waste. But Renee also adds kitchen scraps.

“I use the produce and herbs for cooking and like to develop recipes.” (She shares a favorite on page 8.)

9:30 a.m.—“Finished” compost is dry and light-textured. As we work it into her 4- by 20-foot raised beds, I notice it has a pleasant, slightly sweet aroma.

“The raised beds concentrate water and fertilizer where it’s needed,” relates Renee. “You can reach the plants from either side, so you don’t step in the bed and compact the soil.”

10 a.m.—On our walk to the other trial plot, we give “Patches,” Renee’s old horse, some apples. Renee loves riding Patches. “And, he’s an important fertilizer source!” she adds with a chuckle.

“Over 20 years ago, I met a Dutch seed dealer who said he’d get me better seeds to try. I saw a big difference in the quality of the vegetables and flowers.”

Inspired, she continued to search for and test seeds—and launched a seed catalog. She’s since sold the catalog business to a larger company (which discontinued it 2 years ago) and has refocused on garden center and Internet sales.

Renee introduces about 20 new seed varieties annually—a little over half are flowers. Zinnias she’s testing are at their peak, filling two 40-foot rows with fabulous flowers in a rainbow of color. An old-fashioned mixture grown from seeds she currently sells blooms alongside a similar mix another supplier claims is better.

The wannabes aren’t as abundant, full and pretty as Renee’s. “We’ll stick with what we have,” she says.

As we make our way along the rows, she assesses size and fullness of the plants, and color and quality of the flowers, saying “yea” or “nay.”

Delighted with unusual light-green zinnias, she suggests they’d set off brighter colors in a bouquet. Florist-quality “doubles” get her nod, as do a variety that looks like a dahlia and one with narrow, raggedy petals. “Quirky and fun,” she comments.

10:30 a.m.—I put in my two cents worth on new multicolored “rainbow seed” mixes. Besides the Bright Crayon Colors, we pick a Cool Crayon Colors bouquet of pinks, lavender and white. “Get the stems into water right away,” Renee reminds. Quick as I snip, I plunge them into a flower-harvesting bucket to keep them fresh.

“Zinnias are great cutting flowers,” she notes. “They’re long-lasting—and the more you pick, the more you get.”

Next, we bunch magenta, rose, cherry and cream varieties. “I think this combination is a go,” she says, pleased at the effect. “We develop custom mixes and color-code the seeds.” Renee contracts with a company in Colorado to pack the seeds, which she orders in bulk.



Peppers called Bull’s Horn provide a lighthearted moment for Renee and Ann. Below, Ann joins tasting panel of Renee and her staff to judge new vegetable varieties.



11 a.m.—We pull back a shade cloth revealing bushy plants loaded with peppers. Picking several of each, I notice one long, pointed sweet red Italian variety is appropriately called Bull’s Horn. Playfully, Renee holds two horn-shaped peppers to her head and fakes a charge!

11:30 a.m.—On the patio, I taste-test the



Adjusting sprinklers in Renee's half-acre "kitchen garden" is a task Ann tackles with trial-garden manager Arlene Kozimbo (right).

peppers with Renee and her crew. All three of the red Italian types we test are attractive and tasty, with a nice crunch. By a close vote, one with a bit thicker wall wins. Then we munch spicy Thai peppers, Spanish pole beans and succulent round Carmello tomatoes, a tasty



Renee's Garden Seeds are attractively displayed at garden centers nationwide. Renee Shepherd (at right with her staff) has tested every variety she markets.

hybrid from France.

"You won't find these varieties available as bedding plants," says Renee. "But starting them from seed is fun and satisfying, offering gardeners a huge diversity of flavor, color and fragrance."

1 p.m.—After lunch, we set up germ tests. We're not concerned about bad little organisms, as I first thought, but rather germination. Under Renee's supervision, I carve little furrows into a box I've filled with a potting soil mixture and plant 100 bean seeds.

Southwestern Chicken Skillet

- 1 pound boneless skinless chicken breasts, cut into strips
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 large sweet red peppers, julienned
- 2 large sweet yellow peppers, julienned
- 1 large onion, halved and thinly sliced
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh oregano or 3/4 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon salt

"We'll check these every day or two. I'm looking for at least 85 percent germination—85 of the 100 seeds sprouted—before I'll test the variety."

2 p.m.—Back in the trial garden, we select tall amaranth with beautiful red foliage for a new introduction. "It's easy to grow and stunning," Renee relates.

She also approves lush light-blue morning glories (Glacier Ice). "What's interesting is that these open pink, then turn icy blue," she says.

3 p.m.—We photograph the dazzling zinnia bouquets for her Web site, then wind up the afternoon by rearing wrought iron display shelves and seeds for garden centers.

Feeling the bumpy seeds in these pretty packets makes me think this story belongs in a winter *CW* issue—not one published in early autumn, which is when I visited Renee.

After all, now is the time many of us start dreaming about and planning our garden for the new season. My workday with Renee just might plant a seed!

Editor's Note: For more information, visit Renee's Web site by logging on to www.countrywomanmagazine.com/links.

1/4 teaspoon pepper

1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes

3 tablespoons minced fresh cilantro

1. Sprinkle chicken with lemon juice; set aside.
2. In a large skillet, saute garlic in oil for 1 minute. Add the peppers, onion, oregano, cumin, salt, pepper and pepper flakes. Reduce heat; cover and simmer for 10 minutes.
3. Add the chicken; cover and simmer for 10-15 minutes or until the vegetables are tender and the chicken is no longer pink. Sprinkle with cilantro. **Yield:** 5 servings.

Renee's Zinnia Tips

- In spring, wait until air temperatures warm into the 50° range both day and night, then plant a good half of your zinnia seeds in the garden. Plant the rest 2 to 3 weeks later to extend the bloom season.
- When seedlings are several inches tall, thin them so they're about 12 inches apart.
 - Give plants about 1 inch of water per week and fertilize them regularly with flower fertilizer according to package instructions.
 - For the longest vase life, cut when blossoms first open—the petals will be rolled and look like quills. Plunge stems immediately into a container of tepid water to condition them.
 - Zinnias are unusually thirsty flowers. Check vase water levels daily and add more as needed. Your bouquet should last up to 2 weeks.

