

Grandmother's Garden

at Duncan House

“Grandmother’s Garden” suggests a long-ago era when home gardens primarily fed families. They provided fresh veggies and herbs used for cooking and medicine. Most families, regardless of their financial status, had a few ornamental plants: “porch plants” in pots and cherished roses,

peonies, or hollyhocks that made their home a welcoming place. The vegetables, herbs, perennials, and roses currently being grown at Birmingham Historical Society’s Duncan House Gardens at Sloss Furnaces reflect plant materials that were available to Birmingham residents in the early 1900s.

What is an “heirloom” plant?

While definitions vary, an heirloom plant is generally considered to be a variety of flowering plant or vegetable that is at least 50 years old, is not commercially grown, and is “open-pollinated,” which means it can be grown from seed into new plants that look exactly like the parent plant. Most heirlooms are time-tested, hardy, easy to grow, and often disease-resistant. Native Alabama heirlooms are especially well adapted to our growing conditions.



Why grow heirloom plants?

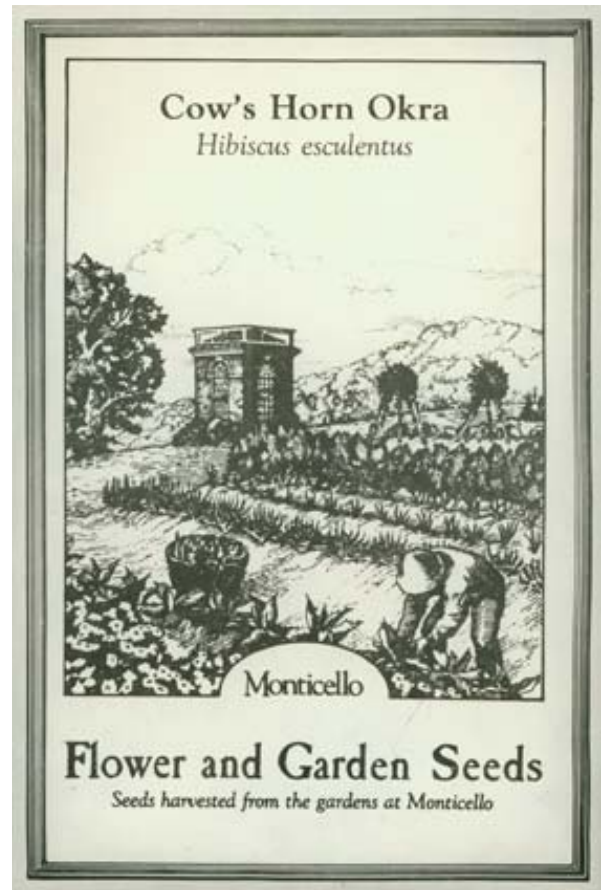
- They taste better than commercial hybrids
- produce a safe, secure food supply
- provide greater yields
- require less chemical sprays
- help preserve genetic diversity
- help sustain traditional organic gardening practices
- help feed pollinators—the bees, birds, butterflies, bats and many beetles—that find hybrid varieties less attractive
- provide an alternative to genetically altered crops
- evoke pleasant memories of bygone times

Heirloom vegetables tend to have stronger flavors than modern, hybridized versions. Aficionados of heirloom tomatoes tout their distinct tastes and colors (though some are

thin-skinned and prone to cracking and diseases). A few favorite heirloom tomato cultivars are *Brandywine*, the exotic dark-skinned *Cherokee Purple*, and the pink *Mortgage Lifter*.

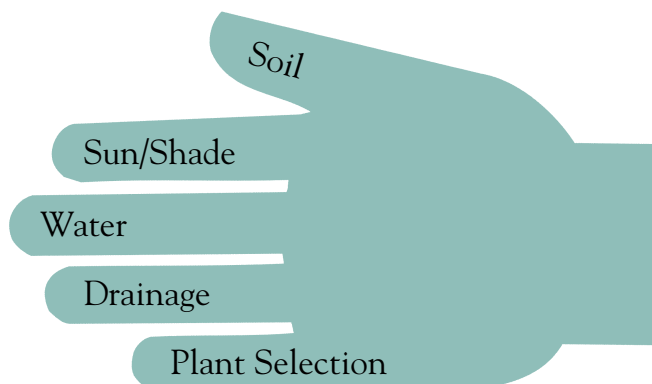
Sources of Seeds and Plants

Many **seed catalogues** offer heirloom seeds as increasing consumer interest has created the demand to grow them. “Grandma’s plants” can be obtained through catalogues such as Victory Seed Company (www.victoryseeds.com), Southern Exposure Seed Exchange (www.southernexposure.com), Kitchen Garden Seeds (www.kitchengardenseeds.com), and Seeds of Change (seedsofchange.com). These sources include heirloom items among many other offerings of the “new, improved” varieties. In addition, seeds for the same varieties of flowers and vegetables grown more than 200 years ago at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s Virginia home are available from (<http://monticellostore.stores.yahoo.net/inofcona.html>). Another on-line source for seeds and plants native to this region is Larry Chandler of Sand Mountain Herbs in Fyffe, Alabama (www.SandMountainHerbs.com). Jan Midgley, Wild-flower Inc. in Wilsonville, Alabama specializes in native perennials and will grow requested plants. Call or email her at 205-669-4097 or jwildflwr@aol.com. Our herb transplants from the Sandy Mush Nursery in North Carolina (www.sandymushherbs.com) have thrived. Our figs and roses came as one-gallon plants from Jason Powell at Petals from the Past in Jemison, Alabama (www.petalsfromthepast.com). Local botanical groups—the Rose, Dahlia, Herb and Fern Societies—offer transplants at their yearly events and sales, listed at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens website: <http://www.bbgardens.org/plant-group.php>. Some local nurseries carry some heirloom offerings.



Grandmother’s Garden is that “old-fashioned” garden of hardy perennials, self-sown annuals, and native American plants. Its exuberant and seemingly haphazardly arranged flowers and vegetables are set in rectangular beds and usually fenced or hedged. Hollyhocks, phlox, sunflowers, and roses are perennial favorites. Garden historians describe the rise and fall in popularity of this “old style garden” which was already “old style”

in the late 19th century. These historians also chart the general public’s fondness for “Grandmothers’ Gardens” in the period from the close of the Civil War to World War I. These gardens were generally located close to the house and meticulously tended by one person: Grandmother. See May Brawley Hill’s *Grandmother’s Garden—The Old Fashioned American Garden 1865-1915* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995.)



Planting—The One Hand Reminder

Here is a simple “one-hand reminder” for planting heirloom vegetables, perennials, and annuals:

Thumb = Soil
 Index Finger = Sun/Shade
 Middle Finger = Water
 Ring Finger = Drainage
 Pinky Finger = Plant Selection

Everything else—fertilizer, mulch, pest control—are subsets (or knuckles) of these fingers.

Thumb Know your **soil**: what it has in it, what it has not. Soil conditions make the difference between plants living, surviving, or thriving. Compare the soil to the foundation beneath a house. No matter how fancy the frills, the house will collapse if the foundation is not solid. Soil is critical to growing everything (except epiphytic and aquatic plants).

Index Finger Think of this as the “point to” finger. Are you pointing to a sunny area, a shady area, or one with **sun and shade**? Plants, like people, have “comfort zones” in which they are happiest. We can tolerate warmer, colder, drier, wetter, but we **PREFER**, and are most productive in, our comfort zone (“c-zone”).

Middle Finger Water is critical. Plants require sufficient **water** to survive and thrive. Too much can be as bad as too

little. Understanding water requirements can be the difference in a healthy, productive, attractive plant and one that is not.

Ring Finger Adequate **drainage** is as important to plant health as is sufficient water. Drainage relates to the length of time plants can survive and thrive in particular levels of moisture. Too much water in the “root space” of most plants literally drowns them; therefore, soil that does not drain sufficiently is as bad as soil that is too dry.

Pinky Finger “Put the right plant in the right place” is a favorite adage of successful gardeners. Judicious **plant selection** requires knowing what will happen once a plant arrives. Ask questions first; know “who” or “what” is making a new home in your landscape.

What We Do at Duncan House Garden

Test Soil - Determine pH and fertilizer requirements, this step is a must which should be repeated every three years. (Contact your County's Extension Office for a soil test.)

Fertilize - Apply an annual dose of well-composted horse manure (from local sources). If that option isn't available, many other **organic fertilizers**—chicken manure or litter, bat guano, worm castings, blood meal, bone meal, fish emulsion, peat, composted yard and kitchen scraps, etc.—are locally available.

Pest Control - Primarily hand pick pests; some herbs also serve as plant allies repelling insects (a practice known as



companion planting). Because of their aromatic nature, herbs help fight against insect infestation when planted among vegetables. Basils and parsley planted with tomatoes, beans and cabbage are good; garlic with roses, and oregano with cabbage and cucumbers. Cilantro, dill and parsley (let go to seed) attract helpful bugs.

Weed Control - Apply mulch (two to three inches of it including pine straw and bark atop layers of newspaper and weed cloth) and an occasional spot application of a synthetic herbicide.

Watering - Rely on Mother Nature as much as possible together with the generous use of mulch, and irrigate as necessary for plants' survival. Our system is set to water twice weekly in the early morning, delivering a minimal amount of water and setting low expectations for our plants' water needs.

Our Grandmother's Garden at Sloss Furnaces demonstrates the use of heirloom plants and we share the knowledge gained of what did and what did not work in our garden. Our garden is in full sun and subject to heavy winds. As it is on a gently sloping site, located atop a former concrete plant, it drains well. Our roses and herbs love it. (We can't grow shade and moisture-loving plants.) Your experience may be different because your "hand" won't be the same as ours or anyone else's. However, you will deal with the same basics: soil, sun/shade, water, drainage, and plant selection.

When to plant?

Plants are normally somewhat forgiving as to planting time; however, do follow the "wait until danger of frost is past" advice. This year, experts predict that will be mid-April. Because many heirloom plants are started from seed, this advice is doubly important unless plants are begun indoors and transplanted when conditions are favorable. Transplants are more expensive to buy, but they are often hardier and establish themselves more quickly.

Heirloom Varieties Currently Grown in the Duncan House Garden

Roses: Duchesse de Brabant 1857 (fragrant pink roses), Louis Philippe 1834, Lavender Lassie, Prosperity, Archduke Charles (crimson outer petals and pink centers), Petit Pink Scotch, Mutabilis, Louis Philippe (dark red to pink cup-shaped double flowers), Prosperity 1919 (fragrant white), Marie Pavie (fragrant clusters of white semi-double flowers), Crimson-Cramasi Superieur 1832, Petite Pink Scotch, pre-1949 (mounds of cascading branches), Duchesse de Brabant, and Archduke Charles

Perennials: Columbines, Cypress Vine, Iris, Lilies, Peonies

Annuals: Black Eyed Susan, Cockscomb, Four O'Clocks, Johnny Jump-ups, Pinks, Zinnias, Hollyhocks (**actually bi-annuals**)

Kitchen Herbs: Basils, Mints, Oregano, Parsleys, Rosemarys, English Thyme

Medicinal Herbs: Bee Balm, Burnet, Catnip, Chamomile, Chaste Tree, Chickweed* Cleavers*, Comfrey, Dandelion*,



Elderberry, Elecampane, Bronze Fennel, Feverfew, Hyssop, Lavender, Lovage, Mullein, Plantain*, Joe Pye Weed, Rue, Skullcap, Soapwort, Sorrel, Spearmint, Sumac*, English Thyme, Valerian, Wormwood, White Yarrow

Vegetables: Black Krim and Red Cabash Tomatoes, Cow's Horn and Heirloom Red Okra, Moon Sand and Stars Watermelon, Blue Lake Pole Beans, Hyacinth Beans, Summer Squash, Collards, and Butterbeans

Fruits: Brown Turkey, Celeste, and Lemon Figs

This year we're trying to start Cosmos, Morning Glories, Queen Anne's Lace, Passion Flower, Poke Weed, "Holy" Basil, and several native Alabama medicinal herbs (other than those *ed in the list above). Finding local and native sources for what will grow in our garden is a continuing exploration.

Want to Try a Home Garden This Year

Start small. Try what you want to eat and enjoy. You'll get your physical and mental therapy, "safe and secure" food to share with friends, the satisfaction of knowing you've reduced your carbon footprint, and the joys of watching things grow.

In 1943 Americans planted 20 million "victory" gardens.

For more information, link to *The Alabama Vegetable Gardener Planning for the Home Garden* (loaded with tips, planting time tables, weed control ideas, and recommendations for different veggies) available from the Alabama Cooperative Extension System-ANR-479 (www.aces.edu)

To speak with a real live human being, call the Jefferson County extension office, located upstairs at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens, 205-879-6964. The extension office is the place to which you take your sick plants and scary insects for advice and encouragement.



Most Common Vegetable Crops in Gardens in Rural Alabama in the Early 20th Century*

Butterbean, found in 67% of Alabama gardens surveyed*
Okra, 67%
Tomato, 60%
Corn, 60%
Sweet potato, 60%
Bush Bean, 47%
Watermelon, 33%
Collard, 33%
Bell Pepper, 33%

Most Common Ornamental Annuals

Four-o'clock, found in 47% of Alabama gardens surveyed*
Sunflower, 40%
Petunia, 40%
Marigold, 33%
Coleus, 33%

Most Common Flowering Perennials

Day Lilly, found in 73% of Alabama gardens surveyed*
Canna, 67%
Iris (all species), 53%

Chrysanthemum, 40%
Phlox, 40%
Yucca, 33%
Sedum, 33%
Spiderwort, 33%
Elephant's Ear, 27%
Dahlia, 27%
Verbena, 20%
Yarrow, 20%
Prickly Pear, 20%
Bouncing Bet, 20%

Most Common Flowering Shrubs and Trees

Rose, found in 80% of Alabama gardens surveyed*
Nandina, 73%
Rose of Sharon, 67%
Azalea, 67%
Blue Hydrangea, 47%
Crape Myrtle, 40%
Spiraea, 40%

* *African American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South*, Richard Westmacott, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992). Westmacott's survey notes that local soil and climatic conditions, not race, determined the plants blacks and white grew in their gardens.

It takes at least three years for plants (other than annuals) to thrive: first they sleep, then creep and third year: they leap!

Common Traditional Medicinal Herbs of North Alabama

Aster
Black-eyed Susan
Chickweed
Cleavers
Dandelion
Dogwood
Ginseng
Goldenseal
Mullein
Poke Weed
Plantain
Primrose
Queen Anne's Lace
Sumac (brown and red)

Source: Phyllis Light, Herbalist, Arab, Alabama

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