

Ira Wallace

seed-saver extraordinaire

BY VIVEKA NEVELN

One of the most respected and recognized voices in sustainable agriculture today, Ira Wallace champions heirloom seed varieties and promotes the importance of preserving our seed-saving traditions for a healthier future.

IRA WALLACE is the recipient of the American Horticultural Society's Paul Ecke Jr. Commercial Award this year, in recognition of her efforts in commercial horticulture that have improved gardening practices everywhere. As a worker and owner of the cooperatively-managed Southern Exposure Seed Exchange (SESE), she has spent the last two decades seeking out special and unusual seed varieties that have been passed down through generations or traditionally bred to offer superior traits.

SESE has trialed thousands of these varieties on 72 acres of certified organic land in central Virginia to identify the ones with the best flavors and adaptability to the Southeast. It also relies on a network of more than 70 small farms around the region, which Wallace helped build, to sustainably produce the best of these seed varieties. Currently, SESE's catalog contains over 700 open-pollinated and heirloom varieties of vegetables, fruits, herbs, grains, flowers, and other plants.

Here, Wallace shares what motivated her to start saving seeds as a career, and her thoughts on why seed diversity matters.



COURTESY OF IRA WALLACE

How did you become interested in gardening?

My grandmother got me interested. She raised me in a small town in Florida, where we grew our own food year-round. In college, it was my fun thing, not something I thought of as a career. It was also something I did to keep the memory of my grandmother close after she died the year I started college.

What initially inspired you to focus on heirlooms and seed saving for edible plants?

There were a lot of little steps leading to the right thing at the right time. After college, I traveled internationally and had experiences that pushed me in that direction, such as visiting a Kibbutz in Israel, where I worked on recreating a desert oasis. I moved to Twin Oaks, a cooperative community in Virginia, and began operating a CSA [community-supported agriculture farm] in 1993. I became involved with Southern Exposure around 1999 after its original founders decided to sell it. There were so many wonderful flavors and colors and stories with these seeds—I was fascinated!

What appeals to you about cooperatively operated enterprises?

There's always help to be had in hard times. And I grew up during the Civil Rights Movement; I was one of the kids experiencing de-segregation, which made a lasting impression on me. In some ways, people working together cooperatively for this cause represented to me how you can change the world. My grandma would say, "It might not make a difference what we do, but if we don't try, it definitely won't make any difference."

How do you decide which varieties to offer through SESE?

We focus on varieties that do well in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast regions. We look to our customers to introduce us to varieties they are interested in. Then we trial the varieties and pick the ones that perform well. We also have a seed bank to maintain genetics. We've seen historic varieties of corn, for example, with resistance to blight but maybe not very productive, but they still could be useful for breeding disease-resistant corn.

Which seed varieties are you currently most excited about?

I've begun curating a collection of heirlooms from the African diaspora. Roselle (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*), for example, is a favorite plant for this community of seed-savers. I'm also trying to track down some varieties of watermelon developed by black and enslaved people in the Carolinas.

What gives you the most satisfaction from your work?

I love when I hear from someone with an interesting variety from their family. I'm honored that people trust us to carry these trea-

The American Horticultural Society's Great American Gardeners Awards are given each year to honor individuals, organizations, and businesses that have made outstanding contributions to fields such as plant research, garden communication, landscape design, youth gardening, teaching, and commercial horticulture. For more information, visit www.ahsgardening.org/awards.

sure into the future. I am also very proud of cofounding the annual Heritage Harvest Festival in 2007 at Monticello [Thomas Jefferson's estate in Charlottesville, Virginia]. Our workshops, demos, special tours, SESE Tomato Tasting, and Seed Swap are among the best events related to heirloom education and advocacy that I have organized, touching thousands of people every year. My grandmother would be proud, too.

What are the biggest challenges you see facing seed-saving and gardening?

Modern life takes people away from gardening and seeing physical work as something positive, so there's a big reduction in the number of seed-savers out there. We need to make people more aware of the value of this work. There's a double benefit to our health from both the labor and the raising of healthy food to eat. We need to give people a positive experience with gardening at a young age in a way that sticks with them through life.



Ira Wallace shows heirloom tomatoes at the Heritage Harvest Festival.

How do you feel that SESE and your work are helping to address these challenges?

We are telling the stories of our varieties and the farmers that produce them, especially about the young farmers who want to raise heirloom, nutrient-dense food. And it's not just about the heirlooms of the past, but also open-pollinated, modern varieties that bring new flavors and colors to our world.

What do you hope for SESE's future?

When younger generations realize facts like not all collards are created equal, they will keep our seed-saving traditions going. So, I hope that we'll continue to commit to educating people, and providing seeds to customers who value flavor and nutrition, and then want to save seeds. And I hope that one of these varieties will become a treasure for them to pass down to their grandchildren.

Viveka Neveln is associate editor of The American Gardener.