

Seed savers and their tomatoes

By Eliza Barclay, NPR

Fortunately for those of us who are suckers for novelty, every year fruits and vegetables seem to come in more bewitching colors, shapes and flavors. Lately, we've been tickled by the cotton candy grape and the vibrant orange Turkish eggplant.

If you go to the farmers market this time of year, tomatoes are strutting their stuff in all sorts of glorious and quirky hues: green striped, white, pink and even purplish-brown. They boast intriguing names, like Mortgage Lifter, Arkansas Traveler and Pink Berkeley Tie Dye. Some are true heirlooms, passed down over decades or centuries. Others are brand new to the world, the progeny of the latest cross-breeding experiments.

We got to wondering just who, besides farmers, is to thank for this expanding panoply. And we learned that while there are many professional breeders tinkering with the desirable traits that show up in the new varieties, amateur breeders – passionate seed savers and collectors – also play a vital role in discovering fruit and vegetable varieties guarded and nurtured by families over generations. Every now and then, these amateurs convince seed companies that the rest of the world will want to enjoy something they've discovered.

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