



The Heirloom Report

- David Redhage

Growers from across the state braved the heat on July 12 to attend the Kerr Center Horticulture Field Day. Participants toured the small fruit plots and the heirloom vegetable trials.

The Kerr Center Horticulture Farm has been involved with demonstrations of heirloom vegetable varieties for two years. The purpose of the demonstrations is to identify varieties adapted to Oklahoma that market growers could grow and sell successfully. Consumers are interested in something different, and heirloom varieties have potential as a niche market item.

It is often claimed that heirloom varieties have superior flavor and are more locally adapted than modern hybrid varieties. The Kerr Center wanted to test some of these claims. No yields were taken, but the health and vigor of the plants were observed visually. All vegetables were grown under organic certification and were irrigated. Varieties were selected from the Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, Iowa.

In my garden this year, I planted one heirloom variety called *Bull's Heart* and a hybrid named *Big Beef*. Both varieties yielded well. It was easy to tell the difference between the heirloom and the

Melon.
A native of the warm parts of Asia, and cultivated from a very remote period of antiquity, the Melon is not now certainly known to exist in the wild state, but it is supposed that the original or typical plant, if it is still to be found anywhere, must have an oblong fruit like that of the Persian Melon.

- from *The Vegetable Garden* by MM Vilmorin-Andrieux 1885

Following is a roundup of the heirlooms we grew, and how they did on our farm in southeast Oklahoma during the hot, dry summer of 2001.

Squash

Summer Yellow: *Summer Crookneck* (summer yellow)

Zucchini: *Nimba*, *Black Zucchini*

Winter: *Rouge Vif d'Etampes*

Summer Crookneck is an old-time knobby yellow squash. It produced very well. The zucchinis *Nimba* and *Black Zucchini* both did well. *Rouge Vif d'Etampes* produces massive rambling vines. However, it seems to be very susceptible to squash vine borer and yields were low, even though the squash were large.

Cantaloupe

Burrell's Jumbo

Jenny Lind

Amish

Hearts of Gold

Jenny Lind did very well, setting large numbers of fruit. The variety *Amish* produced, but the flavor was not intense enough for staff members. The main problem we experienced with the cantaloupes was coyote damage.

Most of the crop was lost to coyotes!

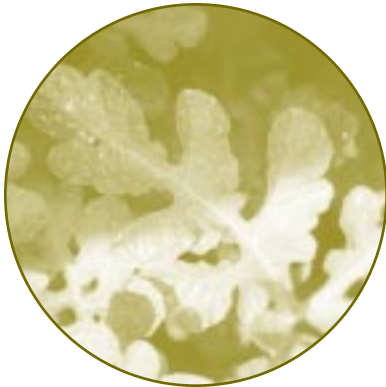


hybrid. The heirloom tomatoes were soft when ripe, which would create problems if shipped commercially but is not a problem for home gardeners and for farmer's market sales. The *Big Beef* tomatoes were definitely firmer and would hold up better if shipped. My experience has been that heirloom tomatoes taste good, but yields tend to be low per plant. Since my garden is small, I planted the heirloom for fresh eating and the hybrid for increased yield and canning.

Heirloom vegetables can help diversify a market gardener's produce stand at the farmers' market, but carefully choose the varieties. Try to first identify varieties adapted to your climate and plant enough to allow for test marketing. If something grows well and sells at the market, you can increase the planting next year with confidence that you will have a successful new product.



David Redhage shows off a *Jenny Lind* cantaloupe.



Watermelon

Georgia Rattlesnake
Mountain Sweet Yellow
Sweet Siberian
Moon and Stars

All of the watermelons produced fruit, but of the four watermelons varieties planted, the staff seemed to prefer the flavor of *Georgia Rattlesnake* and *Moon and Stars*. If you have the room, the *Moon and Stars* plant alone is beautiful and would merit planting just to look at in the garden. The entire plant looks like someone sprinkled it with yellow paint.



Okra

Silver Queen
Clemson Spineless
Star of David
Red Burgundy

All varieties produced.

Peppers

Jimmy Nardello (frying)
Black Hungarian (hot)
Buran

Jimmy Nardello and *Black Hungarian* did well. *Buran* did poorly in our climate.

Tomatoes

Cherokee Purple
Golden Sunray
Beam's
Yellow Pear
Brandywine
Sudduth's
Gourmet
Yellow Stuffer
Pink Yugoslavian
Nebraska
Wedding
Hillbilly

Only *Beam's Yellow Pear* yielded any tomatoes, which surprised us. In my personal garden last year I planted *Cherokee Purple*, *Hillbilly*, and *Brandywine*. All three did well, so we were puzzled by the lack of production from these varieties this summer at the Horticulture Farm. The tomatoes were planted on ridges with drip irrigation and landscape fabric. In contrast, the tomatoes I grew in my garden were mulched with straw. It's possible that the landscape fabric may have increased the soil temperature and stressed the plants. During the 2002 growing season we will plant half of the tomatoes using straw mulch and half with the landscape fabric to determine if the fabric caused the yield problems.