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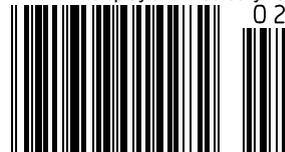
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Pioneer Seed Saver

BY JEANMARIE ANDREWS

WHEN BILL BEST PLANTED HIS FIRST GARDEN, HE HAD NO IDEA IT WOULD BLOSSOM INTO ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S LARGEST AND MOST WELL-KNOWN SEED-SAVING COMPANIES, THE SUSTAINABLE MOUNTAIN AGRICULTURE CENTER, SPECIALIZING IN HEIRLOOM BEANS AND TOMATOES.

BILL BEST KNOWS his beans. They first caught his eye when he was just a toddler. As he recounted in a taped interview for the television program "Kentucky Life" in 2013, "I would go into the cornfield with my mother and pick beans from the bottom of the vines. I was fascinated by

the colors. I got hooked on the idea of growing things and just never got over it."

By the time he graduated from college and married his wife, Irmgard, Bill considered planting a family garden the natural thing to do. "In 1963, we had our first garden in Jackson County, Kentucky," he recalled. "We bought seeds from a seed catalogue and got a good crop

of tomatoes, potatoes, and seed corn, but we couldn't eat the beans."

So they bought new bean seeds. "They were still too tough," he said. "I told my mother, and she gave me seeds from the beans I had grown up with. We grew them the next summer then started selling them in Lexington farmers' markets, where they were very appreciated by the people who bought them. Then we started

Unlike commercial growers, the Bests don't harvest their beans until the "bumps" in the husks show the seeds inside have matured. This variety is called the Rogers Family Greasy Cut-Short Bean.



trading seeds with other farmers, and one thing led to another ...”

In 1988, the *Rural Kentuckian* published a feature about the family’s Berea farm and “things exploded,” Bill recalled. They received eighty-six letters from six states over the next six months. “We just got in from knee deep to neck deep, and it keeps growing.”

Son Michael, who grew up working on the farm until he started graduate school to earn his Master’s and Ph.D. degrees in agricultural economics, took up the story.

“We were growing and selling beans to sell at the farmers’ market in Lexington, but people kept giving us and sending us seeds that they wanted us to grow so they could buy the green beans from us,” Michael said. “Some others just wanted the seeds. Most were from southern Appalachia.

“People wanted the old-time mountain varieties, and it got so we couldn’t keep up with the demand for fresh beans, so we started growing them to save and sell the seeds. That way we could be more help to people. In 2000, we formed the 501c3 corporation and got started with actually producing seeds for sale,” he explained.

The non-profit Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center now sells hundreds of heirloom bean varieties and a rainbow of heirloom tomato seeds—black, green, yellow, red, orange, pink, purple, bi-color, and small ones called “Tommy Toes”—to customers in every state and throughout Canada. (They also sell Candy Roaster seeds for a winter squash that’s considered a regional delicacy and can grow to 4-plus-feet long and weight up to 50 pounds.)

Bill noted that their seeds do well in Western Europe, and daughter Barbara Best Toti added that “Someone just bought them to take them to the Congo” [during last fall’s seed swap].

When the center opened, its main goal was to demonstrate to regional farmers that they have viable options to off-farm jobs when they diversify and utilize the whole farm, including woodlots. That way, regional products can compete with large-scale farms on the basis of quality.



Heirloom bean seeds yield a variety of colors as well as tastes and textures.

Here bean plants are blooming on the Oakley farm in Livingston, Tennessee, which grows bean seeds for the center.





This progression of husks shows the maturing stages of Bill's NT Half-Runner Bean.

“Heirloom beans and tomatoes have a taste and texture that you just can’t get from a commercial tomato or bean purchased in the grocery store,” Michael said. “As the organization has aged we have focused more of our efforts on the production and distribution of seeds from our collection of over 1,000 varieties.”

EDUCATION FIRST

During his forty-year career as a professor, coach, and administrator at Berea College and since his retirement in 2002, Bill has continued to grow beans and tomatoes on his

Berea farm. He collects heirloom seeds throughout the mountains of North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

“In this part of my life,” Bill said on a video, “I’m growing tomatoes for money and beans for love—they require too much work to make a lot of money.”

Along with collecting old heirloom varieties, Bill collects the stories behind them.

“Every seed has a story,” he told us. “Beans were usually named after a woman, because women would notice mutations and save the seeds. She

would plant it the next year, and if it still grew the same way, she would share the seeds with neighbors, so they were named after her.”

Tomatoes, however, were usually named for men. “Maybe they wanted bragging rights on their seeds being bigger and better,” he ventured. (He names his new varieties after local landmarks.)

Bill has authored two books dedicated to seed saving, *Saving Seeds, Preserving Taste: Heirloom Seed Savers in Appalachia* and *Kentucky Heirloom Seeds: Growing, Eating, Saving*, and has won various awards for his seed preservation efforts.

Michael, who has long been part of the business, noted that his father has built a following and has a knack for promotion and publicity, spreading his message in print, on television, and by word of mouth.

“At first, we had to give the heirloom tomatoes we were growing away to get people to try them, but once they did, they became customers for life,” Michael noted.

“Dad was always someone who

Michael Best grew this colorful array of heirloom tomatoes when he lived in Cookeville, Tennessee.



Irmgard Best measures seeds at the family home in Berea, Kentucky.

was interested in something before its time,” he continued. “He’s a visionary. I’ve been doing this for forty-seven years, and I don’t always see what he’s talking about until about ten years down the road.”

The slow food movement, focusing on locally and sustainably grown foods, aided their efforts, and soon chefs were clamoring for heirloom vegetables with more taste and texture. “Most commercial beans are protein free, and tomatoes are nutrient free because they grow them for long-distance transportation,” Bill said.

Modern beans are sold “without lumps,” harvested before the seeds have ripened. Otherwise they would become too tough to eat, like those he grew in his first adult garden.

The farm supplies beans and tomatoes to regional chefs including food writer Ronni Lundy in Asheville, North Carolina, and James Beard Award-winning chef Sean Brock, who owns three restaurants in Nashville, Tennessee.

A few years after the center opened, Bill hosted a seed swap, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last October. He thinks his might have been the first, just as the company was



able to register “heirlooms.org” as its website to sell seeds online well before others took up the cause.

“Most of my first seeds came from my extended family,” Bill said. “My mother and great aunts would swap them at family reunions and funerals or high school reunions. It spread like wildfire, especially when people were becoming more concerned about what was going into their bodies.”

Every year since the center opened, the Bests have recruited volunteer farmers, college student interns, and high school Future

Farmers of America members to help grow, sort, and package seeds for distribution. One of Michael’s former Tennessee Tech students, Sarah Jo Pendergrass, produces many of the bean seeds they sell on her family farm in Byrdstown, Tennessee, an ideal location in southern Appalachia.

The fulfillment part of the business recently moved to an 1890s mercantile building in Gatesville, North Carolina, where Barbara oversees the sorting, packing, and shipping.

“Over the years, our parents worked really hard organizing,





Chef Sean Brock, left, and John Coykendall converse with Bill Best (seated) at last fall's seed swap at the family farm in Berea.

packaging, and labeling the seeds as well as getting the seeds into the hands of the people who wanted them,” Barbara said. When she retired from teaching and joined the business, “I was handed a well-oiled machine from our parents. Our mom, Irmgard, organized the system of labels, weights, and packaging, while our dad grew everything. It’s a really great system that’s evolved. The students who work for our center take pride in what they’re doing, knowing they’re making a difference.”

Part of the center’s mission is training young people during the

main growing season to collect, grow, promote, and develop markets for a wide variety of heirloom fruits and vegetables.

Because heirlooms are not hybrids or genetically modified, they produce the same reliable taste and texture year to year. The Bests grow most of the seeds themselves, occasionally asking friends to germinate seeds that need to be kept separate from other crops to prevent cross pollination, such as goose beans.

One mutation Bill discovered and grew for seed has become their best-seller worldwide, because it

retains its “snap” even as the pods turn from green to yellow.

“It was a mutant from a field bean,” he said. “Beans mutate easily; that’s why there are so many varieties.” He harvested 286 pods from that single plant. “I decided to name it the ‘non-tough half-runner.’ We get comments all the time from people raving over the big white beans for their tenderness and flavor.”

Nearly all of the heritage varieties are climbers, what country folk call “cornfield beans,” the corn stalks serving as poles for the vines to climb. Some varieties might grow to 13 or 14 feet high. Modern beans, grown low to the ground to facilitate machine harvesting for industrial production, can’t compete with heirlooms for flavor.

SEEING THE FUTURE

“This has not been something that we set out to make a business,” Michael said. “It’s more a service kind of thing, keeping the seeds and making them available.”

While they make their seeds available to everyone, some buyers have become competitors.

“Some customers will buy every seed we have,” Michael conceded. “We know they plan to grow them and sell them as well, but you can’t patent a seed, or copyright one. It’s not a good business model for profitability, but it’s good to keep seeds.”

While his children handle center’s management, Bill is still gardening. “Genetically, once heirlooms are gone, they’re gone forever,” he cautioned. “It’s very important for a dedicated group to keep them going, all the edible food crops, preserving part of Appalachian heritage and preserving genetics.”

Michael agreed. “Right now it’s a family-run organization, and we’d like to keep it going past us. In some ways we’d like to look for someone to



The bright seeds popping from husks on the vine are called Pete Ingram Fall Beans.

endow the operation to make sure it keeps going, or have it become part of a university. We don't want someone to just take the collection and stick it in the freezer and just grow the seeds every five years."

Barbara added, "Our whole purpose is to make sure they're there for the future. We're saving yesterday's seeds for today and tomorrow," a motto created by Michael to describe the center's mission.

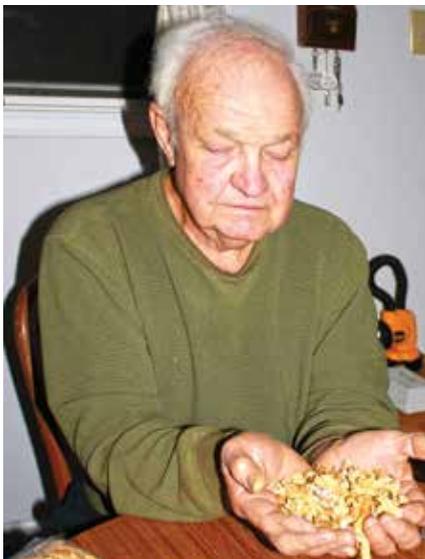
Bill, who turned eighty-eight this past December, said, "I save seeds because I'm very cognizant of the cultural history of my own people, and I also have a vested interest in a healthy diet. My concern is I don't like to see three or four major multinational corporations controlling the world's food supply.

"I think we need to have many small farms providing food for many small communities or collectively providing food for larger cities. We need to go back to the old ways as far as a lot of our farming and foods are concerned, and I'm doing my share to promote that." *

Photos courtesy of the Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center.

For information or to purchase seeds or books, write or text:
Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center
131 Main Street
Gatesville, NC 27938
252.368.6556
heirlooms.org

Bill Best examines handfuls of recently harvested beans.



Harvested seeds dry on tables in the greenhouse on the Best family farm in Berea.

Fields on the Oakley farm are planted with beans for the center.

