'Lazy Housewife' bean

'Boston Marrow' squash

'New Zealand' spinach

Inherit THE Earth

Why treasure heirloom foods

by TERESA O'CONNOR

Whether it's orange tomatoes, rainbow chards or football-shaped melons, heirloom foods—also known as heritage foods—come in colors and silhouettes far beyond what's found in most grocery stores. These edible plants from earlier times have delicious flavor, irresistible charm and fascinating histories.

Modern hybrids are often bred for maximum yield, consistency and long-distance shipping, while heirloom varieties were typically grown in our great-grandparents' gardens sheerly for their ability to provide delicious food. That's why many of us distinctly remember the first time we tasted a sun-kissed heirloom tomato straight from the backyard—especially if our earlier experiences had been the rubbery, out-of-season tomatoes from the store.

WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT HEIRLOOMS

Heirloom plants have open-pollinated seeds that grow true to type, unlike modern hybrids, whose seed may produce a plant different from the parent if pollination is not controlled. Heirloom seeds can be harvested and planted again year after year with predictable results. That's important when you consider 75 percent of agriculture's genetic diversity has disappeared over the last century, according to the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization.

Growing heirlooms is one of the best ways to protect food diversity, believes John Torgrimson, executive director of Seed Savers Exchange, which maintains one of the nation's largest heirloom collections, in Decorah, Iowa.

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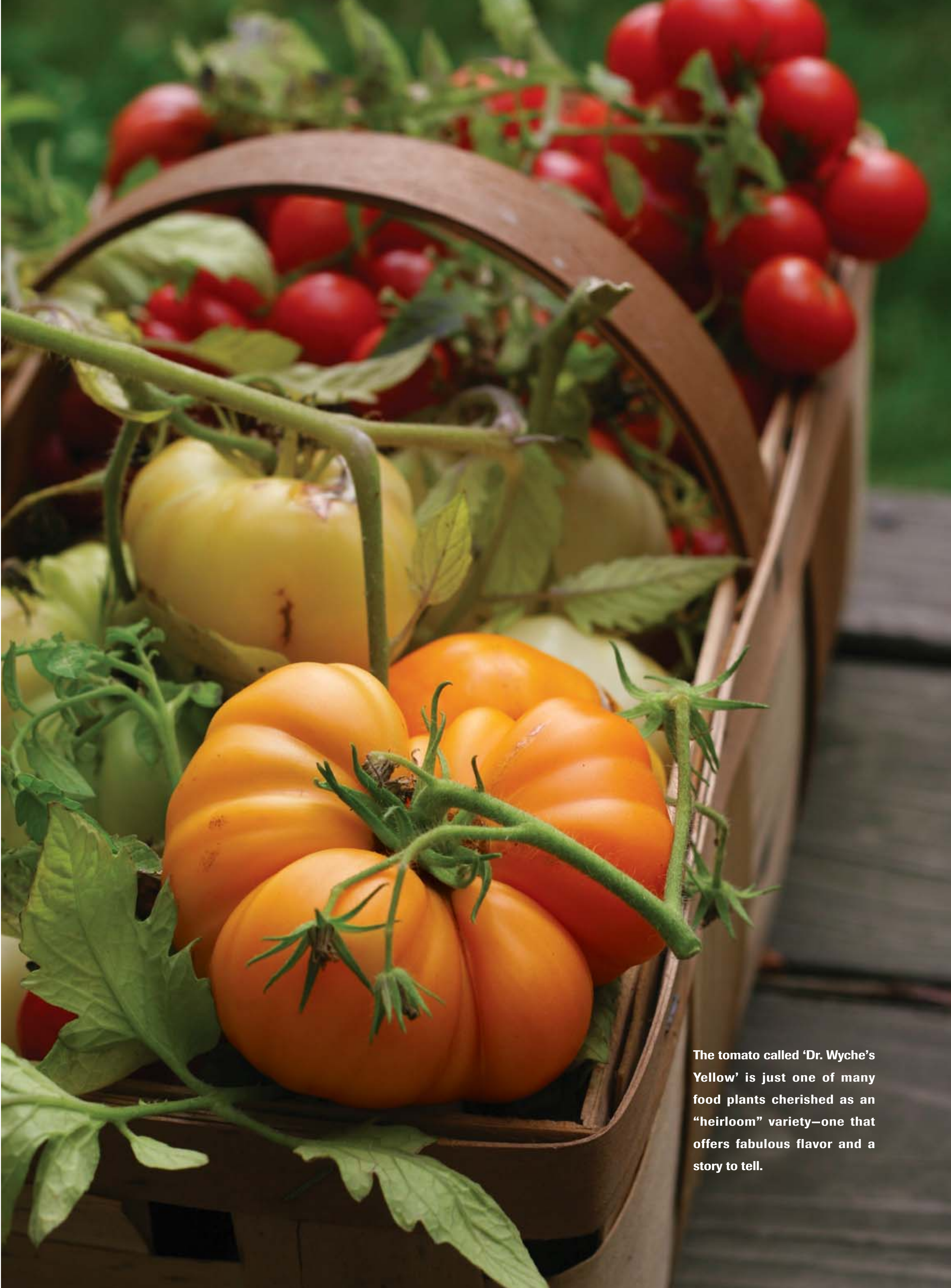

The tomato called 'Dr. Wyche's Yellow' is just one of many food plants cherished as an "heirloom" variety—one that offers fabulous flavor and a story to tell.

'Tennis Ball' lettuce

"Every time you plant, save and pass along heirloom seeds," says Torgrimson, "you are protecting the nation's genetic diversity. In essence, the more people who grow and save heirloom seeds, the more effectively we can preserve our diverse garden heritage for future generations."

Getting these rare plants into the gardens of mainstream Americans is part of the non-profit's mission. When the 'Five Color Silverbeet' swiss chard (also called 'Rainbow Chard') nearly disappeared from the United States a while back, Seed Savers Exchange found seeds in Australia and reintroduced it to this country. Today, its seeds are sold by many companies, and they remain among Seed Savers Exchange's top five bestsellers.

STORIES TO TELL

When you grow heirloom fruits and vegetables, you're not only helping to protect the world's food diversity—you are also keeping history alive.

"Every seed has a story," explains Torgrimson, "Most of our seeds came from families who passed these precious varieties down for generations. The seeds have amazing stories we want to preserve."

Many heirlooms reveal surprising amounts about societal changes, family histories and personal fortunes. Here are eight heirloom vegetables with interesting stories to tell:

The tale of 'Boston Marrow' winter squash (*Cucurbita maxima* 'Boston Marrow') began in the early 1800s, when a tribe of American Indians gave squash seeds to a gentleman in Buffalo, N.Y. He passed some on to a friend, who passed them along to another friend in Massachusetts. Before long, 'Boston Marrow' was the nation's most popular commercial winter squash, staying such for 150 years. D.M. Ferry's 1881 catalog claimed the orange flesh was, "for sweetness and excellence, unsurpassed." Today, only a few companies sell the seeds.

Heirlooms often traveled long distances. South Seas explorer Captain James Cook discovered 'New Zealand' spinach (*Tetragonia expansa*) growing in New Zealand and fed them to his crew to fight scurvy. In 1771, the British botanist Joseph Banks, after traveling with Cook, presented seeds to London's Kew Gardens. By 1863, the plant had earned a mention in Fearing Burr's *The Field and Garden Vegetables of America*. A different species than common spinach, this variety thrives in hot weather, when most spinach bolts.

When Giuseppe and Angella Nardello left southern Italy in 1887 for a new life in the United States, they brought along cher-


'Bidwell Casaba' melon


'Cherokee Trail of Tears' bean


'Stowell's Evergreen' corn

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at a glance

All varieties mentioned in this article do best in full sun. Here are tips for each.

'Bidwell Casaba' melon
Loves heat, rich soil and ample water. 90–95 days from planting to harvest.

'Boston Marrow' winter squash
Plant in rich, well-drained soil. 90–110 days. See page 25 for more on squash.

'Dr. Wyche's Yellow' tomato
An indeterminate tomato–it keeps growing until killed by frost, so it needs caging, staking or other support. 75–80 days from transplant to harvest.

'Tennis Ball' lettuce
Thrives in cool weather and rich, well-drained soil. Takes part shade in warm climes. A butterhead type. 50 days.

'Lazy Housewife' bean
This late-season variety bears heavily until frost. Harvest green snap beans early or wait and pick them later for white shell beans. 75-80 days.

'Stowell's Evergreen' corn
Plant corn in blocks, not rows, for better pollination. 80-100 days.

'Jimmy Nardello' sweet peppers
Peppers love warm soil; don't transplant too early. 80-90 days from transplant.

'New Zealand' spinach
Germination is slow (14 to 21 days); soak seeds for 24 hours before sowing. Tolerates partial shade. 50–70 days.

ished pepper seeds. The Italian seeds thrived in their Connecticut garden, and the couple named the peppers after their fourth son, Jimmy—who himself gave seeds of 'Jimmy Nardello' sweet peppers to Seed Savers Exchange. These prolific, deep red peppers are excellent for frying. They have a sweet flavor that won a prestigious spot on *The Ark of Taste*, a list of foods in danger of extinction. Slow Food USA promotes foods on this list to ensure their survival.

Vegetables can strengthen family ties, but the desire for heirloom seeds can also lead to crime. That happened in the early 1800s, when Nathaniel Newman Stowell sold two ears of corn seed for four dollars to a friend for private use. The so-called friend turned around and sold the seed for 20 thousand dollars. Today, 'Stowell's Evergreen' corn is still the leading white sweet corn for home gardens.

Heirloom plants reveal societal changes, too. Consider the rare pole bean 'Lazy Housewife', introduced around 1810. The variety was the first completely stringless snap bean. It required less work, inspiring its rather controversial name. Burpee's 1888 catalog claimed, "Many persons have testified that they never ate a bean quite so good in distinct rich flavor."

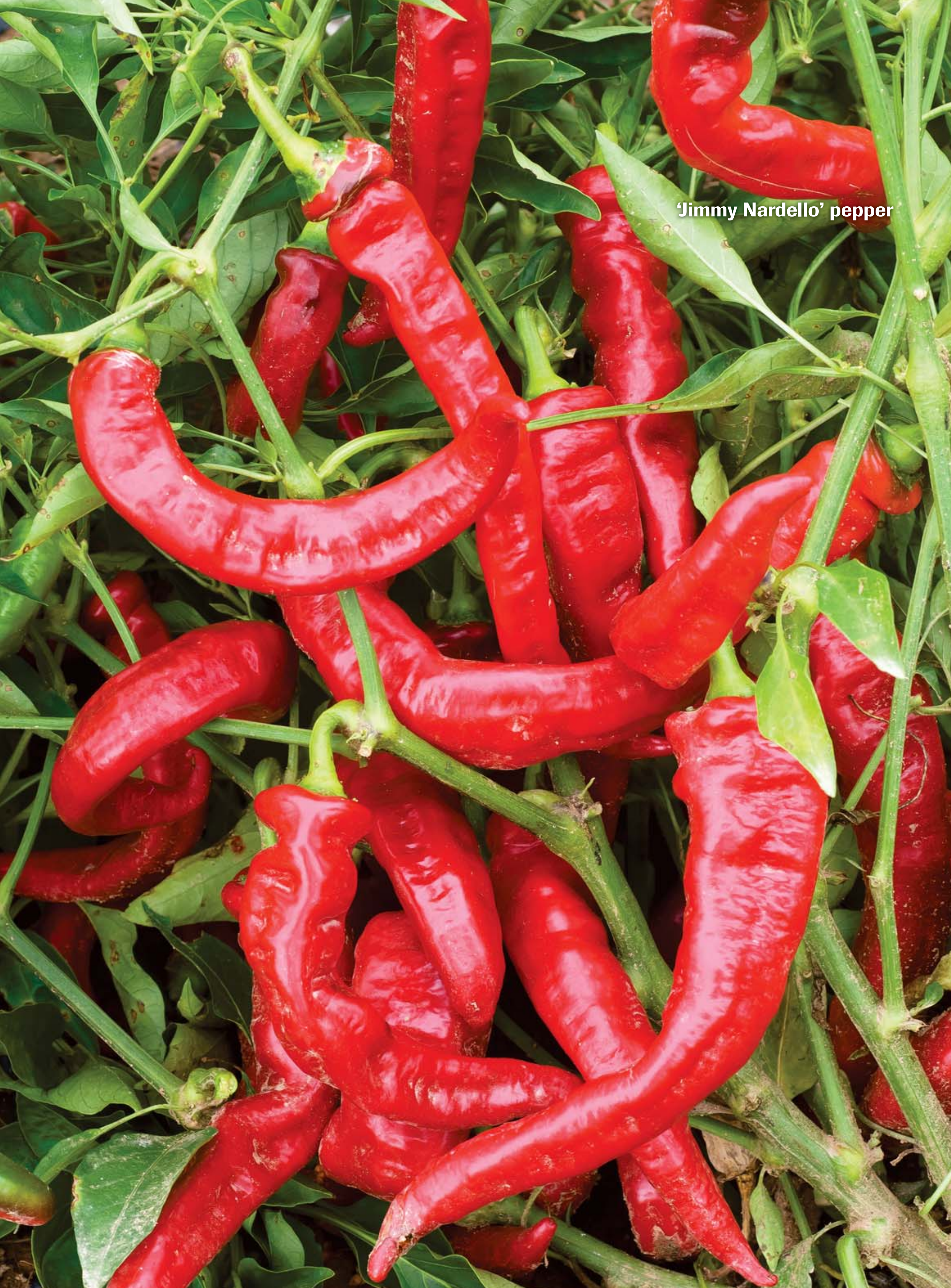
Thomas Jefferson grew 15 varieties of lettuce at Monticello, including, in 1809, 'Tennis Ball', which he reported "does not require so much care and attention." A parent of modern Boston lettuce, it grows seven inches in diameter. During the 17th and 18th centuries, tennis-ball lettuces were pickled in brine to preserve them for winter, according to food historian William Woys Weaver.

The distinguished John Bidwell (1819–1900), a Civil War general and U.S. Senator, is to thank for 'Bidwell Casaba' melons. In 1869, he procured seeds from the USDA and grew the delicious fruit in his Chico, Calif., garden. Shaped like a football, the melons weigh up to 16 pounds and have an orange flesh that heirloom-foods author Amy Goldman says "tastes like heavenly orange sherbet."

Heirloom varieties tell diverse stories, some whimsical, some sad, even from the same source. Dr. John Wyche, of Hugo, Okla., gave us a special tomato known as 'Dr. Wyche's Yellow'. In 1983, the retired dentist explained his gardening strategy to *The Paris (Texas) News*. "Carson & Barnes Circus winters here and the owner is a close friend. I have exclusive rights on the elephant manure," he claimed. "I scatter the lion and tiger waste around my gardens to keep out rabbits and coons." Dr. Wyche also saved seeds of the bean now known as 'Cherokee Trail of Tears', a variety carried by his ancestors when they were forced to move west to what is now Oklahoma.

A garden of heirlooms is a collage of American history.

TERESA O'CONNOR, a Master Gardener, co-authored *Grocery Gardening* (Cool Springs Press, 2010). Catch up with her at seasonalwisdom.com, her blog.


'Jimmy Nardello' pepper