

Searching for the New and Different

Each year as the seed catalogues roll in we keep an eye out for what is new, unusual and different in herbs and vegetables that might possibly tempt our chefs' palates. "New" is of course a relative term; the seed companies that we really love have a passion for seeking out heirloom and traditional seed varieties savored in cuisines around the world. Here are some offerings that caught our eye this year.

Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds

2278 Baker Creek Road, Mansfield, MO 65704 (417) 924- 8887
www.RareSeeds.com

Three years ago we discovered this exceptional family- owned seed company and brought it to the attention of *In the Kitchen* readers. I mention it again because I continue to be absolutely delighted with its vast array of heirloom and ethnic seeds from all corners of the globe. Now in its 11th year, Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds lists vegetable, herb and flower seeds from 66 countries, in a glossy full- color catalogue that will make even the most casual gardener wish for more land to cultivate. Our initial picks include an Australian heirloom cucumber called *Richmond Green Apple*, with sweet, juicy light green fruit the size and shape of a lemon. Phil wants to expand our heirloom tomato palate with *White Tomesol*, a cream- colored, rich- tasting 8 ounce tomato, and *Aunt Ruby's German Green*, a beefsteak with neon- green flesh even when ripe and "tastier than most red tomatoes". And he'll make room in his pepper patch for *Leutschauer Paprika*, a medium- hot drying pepper that has been grown in Hungary since the 1800s.

Richters

357 Highway 47 Goodwood, Ontario, LOC 1AO Canada (905) 640- 6677
www.richters.com

This catalogue is an herb gardener's dream come true, with an exhaustive array of culinary and medicinal herb plants and seeds for both novice and professional growers. This is one of only two seed sources I've found for *Roselle*, or *Hibiscus sabdariffa*, a tropical tea plant whose fleshy red calyxes are brewed to make a delightfully tangy tea. (Baker's Creek Heirloom Seeds, above, is the other source.) This is the tea herb that makes Celestial Seasonings Red Zinger Tea so zingy. We grew it for the first time last year and were able to successfully harvest enough flowers to make us want to try again. (It's a day- length sensitive plant and doesn't flower until the days get shorter in early fall. Being tropical as well, it must either be grown as an annual or brought indoors for the winter if potted.) The other Richters' herbs that intrigue us this year are 'Lesbos' or Greek Columnar basil, a hard- to- find non- flowering variety with upright growth of 3 feet or more and a spicy, true basil scent. Just for fun we'll plant the Toothache plant, or *Spilanthes acmella*, with gumdrop- shaped yellow blooms and leaves that have a mild anaesthetizing effect when eaten. Apparently this has become a much sought after- herb in chi- chi restaurant circles, with chefs using the leaves as an edible and surprising garnish. We'll see if any of our chefs bite!

Southern Exposure Seed Exchange

P.O Box 460, Mineral, Virginia 23117 (540) 894- 9480
www.southernexposure.com

This worker- owned cooperative is close to home but flew under our radar until last year, when we met SESE's Ira Wallace at the JMU Carrier Arboretum's Herb and Garden Festival. Over 500 heirloom and open- pollinated vegetable, herb and flower seeds are offered here by seedsmen who give us yet another opportunity to Buy Local. I love the highly personalized descriptions and detailed growing information that accompany the listings, making it easier to choose the varieties that will grow well in central Virginia. We look forward to trying *Big Rainbow* tomato, with green, yellow and red stripes on large, disease- resistant fruits. And surely we can find room for a few rows of *Hill Country Heirloom Red* okra, with 3- inch green pods sporting reddish tips and ribs, great flavor and drought tolerance. *Yellow potato onions* beckon as well; I love the promise they hold of a perpetual onion patch.