

Dining with Diversity

Take the diversity quiz and discover the possibilities!

(answers are at the end of this article)

Potatoes:

- A. How many varieties of potatoes can you purchase at the supermarket?
- B. How many varieties (cultivars) of potatoes are known worldwide today?
- C. How many varieties of potatoes are available to the kitchen gardener?

Did You Know – that potatoes were at one time a commercial agricultural crop in Southern New Mexico?

Garlic:

- A. How many varieties of garlic can you purchase at the supermarket?
- B. How many varieties of garlic are available to the kitchen gardener?

Did You Know – there are two main groups of garlic, hard-necked and soft-necked. Supermarkets carry soft-necked types because they are cheaper and can be grown using mechanical equipment. The hard-necked varieties are more labor intensive to grow, harvest and cure, but are generally better flavored.

Lettuce:

- A. How many varieties of lettuce can you purchase in the supermarket?
- B. How many varieties of lettuce are available to the kitchen gardener?

Did You Know – spring and fall crops of head lettuce are grown commercially in the Mesilla Valley.

Well, by now you more than get the idea. Our current commercial agricultural system can provide us with only a small fraction of the diversity of food plants developed during thousands of years of food growing. Many old cultivars are already lost and none of the best tasting varieties are commercially viable in the global food system.

However, in your own kitchen garden a huge percentage of the available cultivars can be grown in their season with little to no extra effort or special gardening knowledge. The rewards are better tasting produce, longer harvests, reduced costs (once you start saving your own seed) and the satisfaction of participating in today's movement to preserve the diversity of food plants from the past.

The largest seed network for gardeners in North America is Seed Savers Exchange. They grow seed for their seed-bank and for sale on their 890-acre headquarters farm near Decorah, Iowa. You can purchase seed for some varieties from their online catalogue and you can also purchase varieties that SSE members grow and list through the Seed Savers Yearbook. The 2005 Yearbook list 801 “listed members” (those offering seed grown in their own gardens) and 11,848 unique varieties (including flowers).

There are many other seed networks, exchanges, seed-banks, and individual growers dedicated to maintaining local and global seed diversity. And most of them are accessible through the Internet. It’s never been easier for gardeners to share seeds and knowledge. So if you want better tasting food and a more rewarding gardening experience, explore the incredible diversity of heirloom varieties that are so readily available today.

[Seed Savers Exchange](http://www.seedsavers.org) (www.seedsavers.org) *is a nonprofit organization that saves and shares the heirloom seeds of our garden heritage, forming a living legacy that can be passed down through generations. When people grow and save seeds, they join an ancient tradition as stewards, nurturing our diverse, fragile, genetic and cultural heritage.*

“Grow you own – its better for you and for the earth”

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Diversity Quiz - Answers

Potatoes:

- A. generally 3 or 4
- B. somewhere in the neighborhood of 5,000. (many landraces are still being named and registered in South America)
- C. 421 varieties are listed in the Seed Savers Exchange 2005 Yearbook (all are available in the U.S.)

Garlic:

- A. generally 1, sometimes 2 or 3
- B. 320 without much searching - 314 of them in the Seed Savers 2005 Yearbook.

Lettuce:

- A. 1 head lettuce (Iceberg): 1 romaine, 2 loose-leaf and a couple of bibb varieties. Counting those in the bagged salad mixes, maybe a dozen.
- B. at least 128 varieties of head lettuce, 191 of leaf lettuce and 43 varieties of romaine